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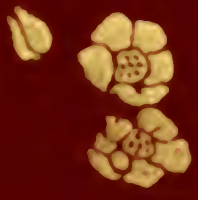

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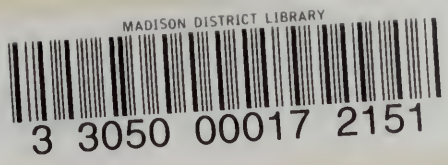

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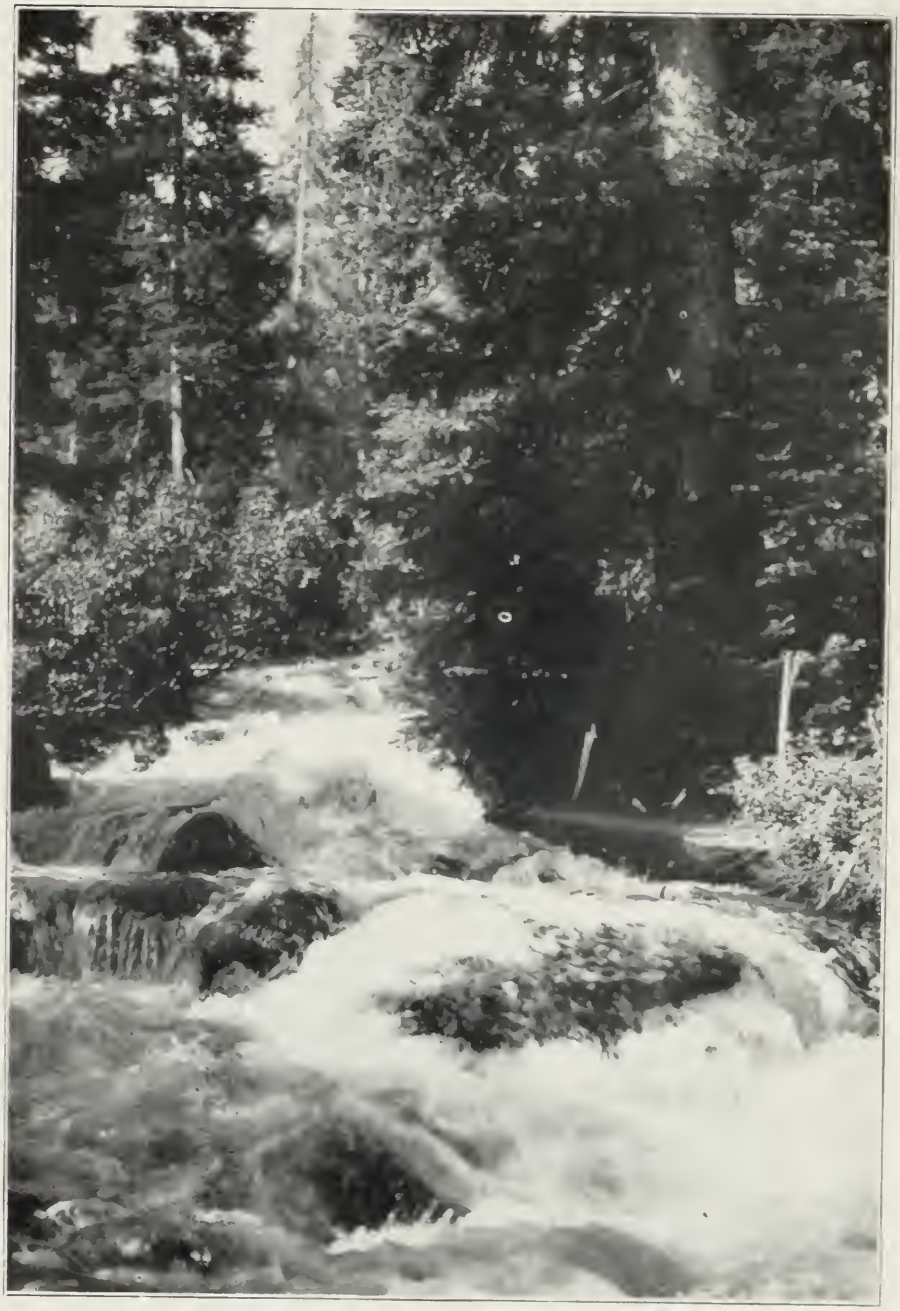

THE SPLENDID MOUNTAIN STREAM WAS A NEVER ENDING DELIGHT"

WILD ROSES

A Tale
of the Rockies

BY

HOWARD R. DRIGGS

MADISON LIBRARY DISTRICT
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To My Mother

WHO LOVED THE WILD ROSES

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WILD ROSES

Chapter I

A COWBOY CELEBRATION

SOME unpoetic old frontiersman first called the place a trapper's "hole," — an ugly, misleading name for this wondrous mountain valley, lying up there on the western slopes of the Continental Divide next to the Yellowstone country, almost surrounded by a rim of craggy, snow-streaked mountains, and grassy, wooded hills, out of whose picturesque canyons streams came leaping and sparkling to make a silvery network over the valley floor and to combine at last into the beautiful river that winds along the base of the western hills. This web of streams may still be traced as one gets a kind of bird's-eye view of it from the hills above; but irrigation has given a conventional aspect to the valley floor by checkering it with farms, dotting it with regularly laid out towns and cities, and marking it with surveyors' roads and canals.

Some thirty years ago, when the first wave of colonization broke over the rim of this valley, it was still nature's playground, the haunt of herds of antelope, elk and deer. A few widely scattered ranch shacks, a trapper's hut or two, with occasionally a group of tepees, pitched temporarily by some wandering band of Indians, were the only human habitations within its borders.

There were no garden roses in the valley then, but the wild ones ran riot along the streams among a tangle of thorns, sending their sweet fragrance everywhere.

In that not-so-long-ago time, one day in July, the month of roses there, the valley lay dozing under the spell of the noontide heat. A warm haze spread over the drowsy hills; the cooling canyon breezes were asleep; even the quaking aspens were still; the sky was cloudless; there was nothing to keep the sun from pouring down all of its rays fiercely upon the scene.

To escape its scorching heat, everything had sought the shade except the grasshoppers and locusts; they were reveling in the burning brightness, dancing and singing all over the grassy and sage-spread flats.

The cowboys at the Bar B ranch were sprawled about on their bunks, sleeping after

their noonday meal — all but Jim Hardy. He stood out under the porch-like projection of the old log shack, making faces at himself in a broken mirror as he worked with a dull razor to shave the brown stubble off his square-set jaws and chin. Topsy and Rock, the ranch dogs, lay near him, lazily snapping at the buzzing flies.

When the scraping process was done, Jim rubbed his persecuted face to comfort it a little, and then stepped inside of the shack to get a drink. As he was enjoying his second cup of coolness, his attention was suddenly turned on Dick Davis, lying there with his half-open mouth emitting a purring snore. The spirit of rough fun, always strong in Jim, found expression as usual; he dashed the rest of the cup of water into Dick's face.

Dick jumped up choking and sputtering and swearing at his tormentor, who stood laughing over his victim's discomfiture.

"It's a hill of a racket ye're makin'," said Pat Kelsey, the cook; "can't ye let a feller slape a little?"

"Oh, cut out your sleepin'; let's do some celebratin'. Have you forgotten it's the glorious Fourth of July? Come, have a drink with me, Pat." He dashed a cup of water into the waking Irishman's face.

"Ye dirty son of a Yankee!" blurted Pat, jumping up, and making for the joker; "it's auld Ireland that can lick you, if auld England didn't."

"Stop, or I'll shoot," said Jim, jerking a flask of whisky out of his hip pocket, and pointing it at the wrathful cook.

"Be jabers, if it's loaded," said Pat, checking himself, "I'll give up."

He grabbed the bottle out of Jim's hand, uncorked it, and said, "Here's to Ameriky, the land that Saint Patrick Henry didicated to liberty." Then he took a long drink and smacked his lips.

The rest of the boys, roused by the noise, were laughing over the fun.

"Pass the bottle around, Pat," said Jim; "drink hearty, boys."

Every one but Dan Miller and Fred Benton took a drink; they passed the bottle on with thanks.

"Oh, will, boys," said Pat, "there's more for them as likes it." He raised the bottle and took another drink.

A wild thumping of horses' hoofs was heard outside. The boys jumped up and reached the door just as a band of half-tipsy cowboys from Morgan's and other ranches, with Bud Nixon at their head, charged up to the shack.

They checked their ponies with a suddenness that sent the gravel flying in front of them.

"Hello, you stags!" shouted Nixon; "got anything to drink?"

"Sure an' we have," returned Pat; "bring the bucket, Tiddy, and water 'em."

"Oh, to hell with your water; give us some whisky."

"Well, seein's it's you," said Jim, reaching up the flask. It soon went the rounds and returned empty.

"Got any race horses?" said Nixon.

"Yes, a whole herd of 'em that can kick dust in your eyes."

"Talk's cheap, but it takes money to buy whisky. Bet ye my bridle 'gin yours that my horse can outrun yours."

"It's a go. Your bridle's mine," said Jim, starting for the barn, while the rest of the boys continued bantering one another and matching their ponies for other races.

A race track, about a quarter of a mile stretch along the dusty road, was chosen. Dick Davis and Bill Peters were selected as starters. Dan Miller and Tick Johnson were the judges. Pat was elected stakeholder.

The first race was between Silver Bill, one of the blooded animals of the Morgan ranch,

and Tex, Jim's best saddle horse. The two cowboys, with saddles and with chaps on, jogged off to the starting place and began to play for a good start.

Suddenly they whirled and leaped together across the line towards the goal, the eager riders leaning low with quirts flying. Jim's horse held an easy lead for nearly half the way, then he lost it, the longer-winded roan gradually slipping up and past him. When they dashed by the judges, Bud was full two rods ahead.

"You made me eat dirt square enough," said Jim, jerking off his silver-mounted bridle and tossing it to Bud. "That's a good horse you've got."

"Yes, 'n he kin beat any cayuse in this hole," boasted Bud.

"Got anything beside talk to stake on that?"

"My saddle 'gin yours."

"Pull 'er off, and stack her here with mine." Jim loosed the cinches as he spoke, jerked off his saddle and flung it over by Pat.

"Here, Teddy, get your little mare. Let's take the cackle out of this crow."

"All right, Jim, if you say so; but I don't know what Brownie can do. I've never run a race with her."

"That's my risk. Get yer mare."

Fred went back to the shack, took a pan of oats, and walked over to the pasture bars to call Brownie. Hearing him, she raised her pretty head and trotted nimbly up to him. He threw his arm over her glossy neck while she enjoyed the taste of grain, then slipped the bit into her willing mouth, leaped on her and rode over to the boys.

He reached them just in time to see a "joke race" pulled off between Freckles, a pinto squaw pony belonging to Hen Sikes, a big cow-puncher from the Morgan ranch, and Meg Murphy, a tall and lanky old mare that Pat had purchased for five dollars from a stranded emigrant who was passing through the valley. It was a comical sight to see the plump cook perched on his high-backed steed, his smooth face held sober, but his bright eyes twinkling with fun; and beside him tall Hen, with his long legs dangling almost to the ground over the little pony's back. The race was funnier still. The cowboys howled and whooped to see the two coming, Pat making clown antics to keep his big mare going; the little Indian pony struggling to carry his big load through first; but in spite of all Pat's efforts, Freckles won the race, leaving Meg full fifty yards behind.

"Home at last!" cried Pat as he reined his mare, galloping stiffly, to a sudden standstill at the finish. "Give us a drink to cheer our droopin' spirits."

"Have a swig on me," said Bud; "I kin stan' it, fer we're goin' to skin you good and proper to-day."

"Not so sure of that," said Jim; "here, Teddy, let me fix things for you."

"Goin' to ride 'er stripped, air ye?" said Bud, as Jim began to put a surcingle around the mare and over Fred's knees. "Well, tie the kid on tight, for I'm — goin' to — sha — shake 'im up." He took another drink of whisky.

"You'd better tie yourself on, old soak."

"Oh, I kin stick all right,— all right," said Nixon, staggering toward his horse, "and I'll beat thet cowkid so fer he'll never know he started. Gimme a leg up, Ticky, ole boy." Tick helped Bud to mount, and he rode off with Fred toward the starting point, swaggering and boasting all the way.

They had to do a good deal of jockeying to get a fair start. Silver Bill, naturally nervous after his first race, was driven frantic by his tipsy rider, who thrashed the beautiful little animal unmercifully with his quirt. For half a dozen times they tried to get off, and as many times

Dick shouted Bud back, until he got angry and began to curse both Dick and Fred; but finally they managed to get over the line with Brownie about a neck ahead.

"Go," shouted Dick, and down the track they flew. The little mare, without a touch from her rider, held her lead until they were almost to the finish, then leaping in response to a sharp cut from Fred's quirt, she spurted ahead and came across the line an easy winner. The Bar B boys threw their hats in the air and yelled like Comanches.

When the riders had slowed down and turned back, Nixon broke out with his cursing again, and galloped into the crowd sputtering and swearing and accusing Dick and Fred of foul play.

The winning crowd checked their jubilant expressions and turned on him.

"Here, you calf, stop your bellerin' and take your medicine," said Jim.

"What about the start?" asked Dan, as the starters rode up.

"Fair enough!" returned Dick.

"You're a liar," shouted Bud.

Dick leaped from his horse and started for Nixon, who was bristling for a fight.

"Hold on, boys!" shouted Dan, pointing down the road.

The opponents checked themselves and looked up to see two ranch girls galloping towards them. It was Alta Morgan, of the Morgan ranch, and Sally Johnson, the daughter of the game warden. They were riding around the valley to invite everybody to come to the dance at Morgan's that night. As they dashed up to the crowd, the cowboys received them with whoops of welcome. Their coming suggested a new hope to Nixon.

"Here's the pony that can beat the cow-kid's mare," he said. "You're just in time to sa — to save the day, little gal."

"What do you mean?" asked Alta.

"I mean that — that Silver Bill's got beat, and you've got to save the rep — rep-u-tashun of the Morgan ranch; you got to do it."

"How?"

"By racin' Eagle agin' that Brown mouse over thar. Come, now, show 'em your spunk, little one — show 'em your spunk."

"What, ride in a race?"

"Sure!"

"Well, I never did such a thing; but if the Morgan name is at stake, I'm ready."

A lusty cheer greeted the girl's decision. The boys began to lay their wagers. Hats, spurs, chaps, bridles, shirts, kerchiefs, saddles and

even horses were put at stake, while Alta, laughing nervously, made ready for the race. Fred also was excited. To ride any race is enough to make one a little nervous, but to be matched against a dashing girl, and a stranger at that, was a thrilling experience.

"I'm going to win the race," said Alta, throwing a smile at him.

"I hope you do," he said gallantly, "but I'll give you a merry chase."

"All right, come on!"

She was a picture of animation, as they cantered away together,—graceful, alert, eager for the fun, her pretty cheeks glowing and her eyes laughing.

His bright eyes were dancing too; and his frank face was flushing, from the thrill of blended emotions that were stirring his heart.

Eagle and Brownie seemed to sense that something unusual was in the air, but they both held their nerves responsive to their riders' wills.

"Get ready," cried Dick.

They turned their horses toward the north, riding in that direction a few rods; then they whirled close together, and the little animals leaped back, head to head across the line; and head to head they stayed as they flashed along

the track. Alta's hat flew off, her hair was flying in the breeze. They both were leaning forward in excitement and eagerness as the fleet little horses strained every nerve and muscle to win.

The cowboys yelled their wild delight to see them coming, nose to nose, nearer and nearer, heads low, hoofs fluttering, the result in doubt until almost at the finish, when Alta cried, "Win, Eagle, win!"

The little dapple-gray pony leaped in response, and forged half a neck ahead of his glossy brown rival, and he held this slight lead till they shot over the line, past the excited, faces of the yelling cowboys crowded close to see the finish. The riders gradually slowed down to an easy gallop, then turned round together to canter back.

"Fine!" cried Fred; "I'm so glad you won."

"I said I would; but you certainly gave us a close chase. Oh, wasn't it fun?" She threw another joyous smile at him; her eyes were dancing with delight, as they rode up to the cheering crowd. The losers were as happy as the winners. The race was worth the money. And they really wanted her to win, for Alta was a great favorite among them.

"You're full of grit and ginger, little gal," said Jim, reaching out his big hand.

"A regular trump," said Sally, giving her a big squeeze.

"A quane o' hearts!" put in Pat gallantly.

"Oh, thank you, thank you! It was heaps o' fun," responded Alta; "and now I want you all to have some more fun. Will you come to our dance to-night? Everybody is invited."

"We'll sure be there!" shouted the boys, as the girls turned to gallop away.

"I speak for the first dance with you, Miss Morgan," said Dick.

"You may have it," responded Alta, laughingly, — "to pay for giving us such a fine start. Good-by."

They waved their hands at the admiring group of boys and dashed away.

An ugly, jealous look flashed out of Bud Nixon's eyes when Dick spoke up so smartly to get first place that night with Alta.

"You'd better go a little slow around that gal, pardner; er ye might strike some tr – trouble," he said, threateningly.

"If you're lookin' fer trouble, old man," retorted Dick, "you can find it any time you want it."

"Here, cut your cussin'," said Jim, "and have another one on me. You beat us all right, Nixon, but we're game yet."

The bottle was passed around. Then Bud and his tipsy followers gathered up their winnings and struck off whooping down the road, while the Bar B boys returned to the old shack.

Chapter II

NEW TRAILS

WHILE the rest of the boys were discussing the fun, Fred took his shotgun, mounted Brownie and rode away toward the old ford to hunt chickens.

Who was this Alta Morgan, he began to wonder. The daughter of some rancher, no doubt. But she gave signs of a greater culture and a wider experience than the ranch life of those days afforded. Perhaps she was some city visitor to the valley. This seemed improbable, however; no untrained city girl could have ridden a race with such skill. Who was she?

Brownie broke the reverie with a sudden start. Her rider glanced up to catch a glimpse of a yellowish gray object slinking through the sage just a few rods ahead. It was a coyote, trotting sleepily along. Jerking loose his lasso, the boy tapped his mare lightly with his spurs. She leaped in response straight towards the unsuspecting animal. A few bounds brought them within rope's length. Fred flung his lasso,

just as the coyote, catching sight of his pursuers, gave a terrified yelp and leaped, one breath too quick for the whizzing rope.

Fred let out a joyful whoop, as Brownie bounded to bring her eager rider close enough for another fling; but the coyote was flying for his life, and he simply turned himself into a twisting streak of yellow, as he sped through the brush. The little mare held her own well, but she could not close the gap between them; and when the foothills were reached, the coyote, having no burden to carry, gradually slipped up the hills and away.

With one more whoop to relieve his feelings, Fred slowed down. As he sat watching the terrified animal dive into the bigger brush along the creek, he saw a big flock of sage hens, frightened by the coyote, take wing and fly away over the flat.

"There's my chance," he thought, following them with his keen eyes until they settled down again among the sage brush. Then he rode away toward them. When he came within about a hundred yards, he jumped from his mare, tied her rather carelessly to a brush, and, cocking his gun, began to step watchfully through the sage toward the place where the chickens had lighted.

Suddenly, with a sputtering cluck, a big hen sprang into the air. The excited hunter fired at the flying bird and missed. The report of the gun brought the flock out of the brush. He fired again and down tumbled one of them. Watching where it dropped, he reloaded his gun and began to walk about to scare up others; but evidently the whole flock had risen at the first shot; so he picked up the fallen bird and turned to carry it back to Brownie.

To his surprise she was half a mile away, galloping back toward the ranch. Always nervous around guns, she had jerked loose at the shooting, and run away. And she might have kept on going; but suddenly some one on horseback galloped out of the trees at the old ford crossing, and taking in the situation, struck straight for the runaway. It was Alta Morgan, who, returning from her ride, had taken the shorter way home.

Brownie saw her coming, whirled and headed back toward the hills; but Eagle gradually overtook her. Fred, watching eagerly, saw the girl loose her lasso, whirl and fling it over the little mare's head. Checked suddenly at the saddle horn, she turned humbly and came trotting back to her master led by the daring girl.

"Thank you very much," said Fred, "but you shouldn't have risked yourself so to save me a chase."

"Oh, Eagle wouldn't fall with me, would you?" she said, patting his warm neck.

"He is certainly a fine pony; and you surely know how to ride and to throw a lasso," was Fred's complimentary response. "But how can I repay you for this kindness?"

"Just come to our dance to-night."

"Thank you; I'll be there."

"Now mind that you do," she said lightly, turning to leave. "Good-by."

"Good-by," he responded reluctantly, captivated by her wildly sweet ways. She dashed off through the sage on her nimble pony.

Fred intended fully to keep his promise, but his hunt for more chickens led him several miles from the ranch up into the eastern foothills, and before he realized how the day was slipping by the sun had almost set.

The eastern slopes, with all their wondrous forms brought into relief by the evening shadows, and the mountain tops, lighted by the golden glow of the sinking sun, made so beautiful a picture that the boy stopped to enjoy it. As he sat there resting, with leg flung over the saddle horn, drinking in the cool scented breezes

that had begun to pour out of the canyons, he noticed just above him to the eastward a kind of glen that opened gently with grassy, flower-strewn, aspen-groved slopes on to the flat below. Farther up the sides were ragged rocks and pines; and just above the hill over which the shorter trail led into the glen, was a rather bold cliff.

Fred thought he saw smoke rising up the face of the cliff. He looked again more sharply; no smoke could be seen. Perhaps his eyes had deceived him; but he was curious now to explore further.

"How about it, Brownie? Shall we find out what the place looks like?" It was his habit sometimes to think out loud around Brownie. She did not seem to object, so they began to climb slowly up the hillside.

The smoke appeared again; there was no mistaking it this time. The thought flashed across him, "Perhaps it is Indians." He checked his mare. If it should be, Fred had no desire to meet them alone in this strange place, especially since he had heard they were in an ugly temper just then because the game wardens had been checking them in their killing the elk and deer.

He half decided to turn back, but his curiosity held him — his curiosity and love of adventure

made him decide to slip up the hill and take a peep at things. Suiting his action to the thought, he dismounted, tethered his mare to a bunch of brush, and made his way cautiously to the top. When very near it, he dropped to his hands and knees, crept to the summit, and peered through the brush to take in the scene below.

It was a kind of cove, grassy, flower-sprinkled, and strewn in nature's delightfully careless way with groves and shrubs. A great cliff formed part of the background. Several shaggy pine trees shot above it. At the base of the cliff was a grove of aspen saplings, out of which a brook came dancing. But the thing which held his interest most was the cabin that stood directly before him just within the edge of the aspen grove.

The cabin was rather roughly built, but it looked cozy. A generous stone chimney, out of which the thin blue smoke was rising, stood at the north end. One door, half open, and a small window were on the west. The skin of some animal was nailed on the outside. A large dog lay dozing near the door. The occasional clingety-clang of a cow bell broke the evening stillness as bossy, grazing on the sweet grasses near the cabin, would throw her head

from time to time to shake off the bothersome flies. There were no other signs of life around. Fred, however, had assured himself of one thing: it was not Indians that lived there.

Yet Indians could scarcely have frightened him more than did a quiet voice behind him, as it said, "Wal, boy, how do ye like the place?"

Fred jumped to his feet trembling like a leaf, and found himself facing an old mountaineer, gray-bearded, long-haired, looking curiously at him.

"I scared ye, didn't I?" the old man continued calmly. "Wal, stop shakin'; I won't hurt ye; but what are ye doin' here anyway?"

"Why, I was just roaming about the hills, and — and — I happened to see the smoke of your house, and thought it might be Indians, so I slipped up to see."

"Hain't lost any Injuns, hev ye?" the calm gray eyes lighted with a little twinkle.

"No, not exactly," Fred returned more easily; "I'm just out hunting chickens."

"You hain't found many."

"No, I haven't had very good luck."

"That old hen's pretty tough eatin'! You better come down and try some young ones I killed this mornin'. It's gettin' near supper time."

Fred was ready enough to accept the invitation. The afternoon's excitement had made him hungry; but he was hungrier to learn more about his new acquaintance.

They trudged down the trail to the cabin. The dog leaped up at their coming and bounded toward his master; but he stopped uncertain how to greet the boy, till the mountaineer said calmly, "It's all right, Tobe"; and the dog turned to trot ahead of them back to the house.

"The old fellow allus wants to be introduced to strangers," he explained; "good thing he didn't catch you spyin' up there; he might 'a' turned savage. Unsaddle your pony, now, and stake her on that grass patch yender; then come in." Fred obeyed.

"What's yer name, boy?" the old man asked rather abruptly, as Fred returned.

"Fred — Fred Benton."

"Sounds honest," was the rejoinder; "come in and set down while I stir up the fire and get a flapjack fryin'; you won't git pies and cakes here, you know."

"I'm not used to them; but, here, let me help you, mister."

"Don't mister me, boy; call me Uncle Dave, if ye want to. There ain't much to help about;

but ye might git some water in that pail, and chop a bit of wood. It'll hurry things."

"All right," returned Fred, picking up a brass pail that stood on a rude bench along the wall. By the time he had returned with the water and wood, the mountaineer had his batter ready. While the bake oven was heating on the fire, he stepped to a kind of box that he had built over the creek and brought out something wrapped in a damp cloth. He unrolled it on the table and showed two dressed sage hens. It took but a few strokes of his hunting knife to carve them for frying, and then Fred was given the task of tending the chickens while the old man baked the bread and made the coffee.

A rude table was set with tin dishes. The food was spread on it,—a dish of mountain berries, with some cream and sugar, being added to the hot bread and coffee and the fried chicken.

"This is a real feast," said Fred.

"Wal, let's give thanks for it," was the quiet response, and they bowed their heads while the old man said a simple grace. "Now be at home, boy," he added.

The two ate and chatted the while with friendly ease. There was a native charm about the mountaineer, and a touch of mystery that was captivating. Something in the boy, too,

seemed to please the old man. It was Fred's spontaneous, open-hearted attitude toward life. His nature was a blended one. He was full of latent manliness, clearly shown in his straight, square-shouldered form, firm step, and intelligent eyes; yet he possessed a dash of boyishness, too, that kept him natural and unsophisticated. It was this spirit of trustful innocence that won friends for him quickly, especially among children and old people, though it sometimes brought on him the ridicule of fellows like Dick.

Uncle Dave responded more freely than was his wont to the boy's questions about the wilds, revealing the while touches of his own life, about which he seldom talked.

He had been a hunter and trapper ever since his boyhood. Yielding, while yet in his teens, to the call of his red blood for adventure, he had come west with some mountaineers who had chanced to camp near his father's pioneer home in the woods of Ohio. Thrilled by their tales of the wild life on the Upper Missouri, he begged his old parents to let him go. He could help them best, he felt sure, by following the life of a trapper. He would return and settle down some day. They finally gave a reluctant consent, allowing him to leave with their prayers

and blessings. As a constant reminder to duty, the mother slipped into his pack her old Bible. It lay even now on the top of his cupboard. He never saw his parents again. They died before he could return.

Free of all other home ties, he made the Rockies his home. His life had been a long series of thrilling experiences. For many years he had lived among the Indians. He had trapped for Bridger, and other famous fur-traders. Sometimes he had worked with fellow mountaineers, but for the most part he had lived alone as now in some quiet spot close to the heart of nature.

The old trapper rarely mingled with men; when he did, it was but for time enough to swap his furs and stock up with the simple supplies that he needed. He said little; and he parried curious questions so curtly that those who sought to find out anything about his life usually left about as wise as they began.

If Fred had shown any sign of prying into his new-found friend's affairs, he might have met the same kind of rebuff. Fred, however, had no such thought. He simply was enjoying the old mountaineer. They talked of the past of these hills, of the wild life, the Indians, the bear, beaver, and buffalo.

"This country was thick with game when I fust come here," said Uncle Dave.

"I should have liked to live here then," responded Fred.

"Yes, them was good old days," said the mountaineer, "but they was mighty hard ones too, only I was young then and didn't mind hardships. After all, boy, the best days fer you is right now. Don't go to sighin' fer any better time. The life you're livin' is the best one you'll ever live. I've had most o' my days; you're havin' yours. Fill 'em right, boy, jest as they come to you. Don't get the frettin' and wishin' habit. But if you want to see some new country, I reckon I kin help you find it. There air some pretty wild places left in these hills yet. How'd ye like to take a day with me explorin' 'em?"

"Fine! When shall I come?"

"Any time this month'll do; but come up early; I don't like climbin' these hills in the heat o' the day."

"I'll be here the first chance I can get; but I must be off now before it gets dark."

While Fred went after his mare, the old man stood in his cabin door peering up the hills toward the north.

"Wonder what them Redskins got to-day," he said, as Fred rode up.

The boy turned in his saddle to look in the same direction and saw several Indians trailing down the hill. Their ponies seemed to be loaded.

"Guess they've killed some blacktail or young elk."

"It's out of season, isn't it?"

"Yes, but they don't pay any heed to the game laws."

"Won't the warden arrest them?"

"He'll ketch 'em fust; and then if he tries to bring 'em to time, there'll be trouble. They're perty sassy 'bout their rights in this country yet. You'd better take the trail south o' the creek, and keep out of their way."

"All right. Thanks for your kindness, Uncle Dave. I hope I haven't bothered you too much with my questions."

"No bother at all, boy. Glad to hev you. It gets kind o' lonesome here sometimes, with no one to talk to 'cept nature. Come agin."

"I surely will; good night."

"Good night, boy."

The old mountaineer watched until Fred disappeared with a good-by wave of his hand over the crest of the hill, and then he turned to his dog and said quietly, "Come, Tobe, let's git old Middie; it's 'bout milkin' time."

Chapter III

MORGAN'S DANCE

FRED did not reach the ranch till long after dark; he found it deserted of all but Dan, who sat on the steps.

"Hello," he called out cheerily as he galloped up; "all alone?"

"Yes," was Dan's quiet reply; "the rest have gone to Morgan's to dance the devil out of them, or in — I don't know which. Where have you been all day?"

"Oh, just scouting about the hills for fun. There, Brownie, trot away and feed yourself"; he said, jerking off his saddle. After hanging it up, he returned.

"Aren't you going to the dance?" asked Dan.

"Oh, it's so late I don't like to go. I think I'll tumble in and take a good rest. There's work coming to-morrow."

"Yes," responded Dan, "and there'll be few hands to do it. The boys won't get rid of their whisky by then."

The two chatted on a little while, then both went to their bunks and quieted down. Fred lay for a few moments listening to the frogs croaking in the pond near by till he dropped off into a sleep as peaceful as the night about him.

Across the creek at Morgan's ranch, however, the night was far from quiet. The big rooms of the ranch house were bright with light and ringing with music, laughter, and chatty, half-boisterous voices. The dance was at its height.

Old Morgan had been in the war, and he was full of patriotism, always flinging his doors wide open on the Fourth with Western welcome to all his neighbors, urging them to come, and taking it hard if they didn't. So they came in force, on horseback or clattering in buckboards, came full of rough fun, and when they could get it, full of whisky.

It was a noisy, jolly crowd that gathered on this night, cowboys and ranch girls, all ready to swing themselves dizzy, ripe for excitement, whether it came in the form of a frolic or a fight. For, though the program never called for it, a "cowboy scrap" was the one impromptu part always expected, and welcomed by many. A dance, indeed, would have been thought tame without it. There were those who never missed

any chance to touch it off, by some tantalizing act which was lighted matches to powder.

The doings of the day had helped to put the boys at pistol points. Yet for some reason the under current of ill will was kept down unusually well. It might have been because Colonel Morgan, the soldierly, gray-haired master of the place, who, because of the drinking, rather anticipated trouble, had opened the dance with this cheery warning:

"Now, lads and lassies, I asked you here to have a good time; I am going to see that you have it, even if I have to pitch any fool out that does a trick to spoil our fun. Come, Uncle Toby, make the old fiddle do some lively talking."

"All right, Colonel," called back a roly-poly, baldhead of a man, perched on a high seat in a corner. "Take yer pardners fer a grand waltz."

Then, while the smiling, chatty couples began to file about the room, he scraped on his strings to tune up with a little organ played by a lively-eyed midget of a girl.

The music struck up, and the dancers began to swing around, taking their bumps, for the floor was crowded, with jolly good nature. It was a whirl of happy, glowing faces. The dancing, however, was far from rude. Many

couples, indeed, glided over the rough floor with an ease that showed them to be no strangers to the art. Alta was especially graceful. She was electric with life, her sweet face lighted by bright eyes and rosy cheeks, her tripping toes keeping step to the music. Her well rounded form was trimly, daintily dressed in white, a rose-colored ribbon at her throat, and a spray of wild flowers airily caught in her hair. She was playful, but her play had in it a touch of pride, and her voice spoke culture. Her costume, too, had a dash of style that was lacking in the dresses of the other girls, who, though comely enough, had so bedecked themselves in showy ribbons and fluffy laces that they looked rather ungraceful.

Yet, though superior to them in most respects, Alta, from all outward appearances, was unconscious of it. She was just one with them. Everybody, from the nattiest cowboy to the shaggiest rancher, felt at home in her presence. Even the other girls, though they might have felt a twinge of jealousy at her popularity when they saw the boys, as always, in a cluster about her, had accepted her leadership; for everybody liked Alta Morgan, except Bud Nixon.

Ever since she had rebuked him for his forced and unwelcome attentions, he had carried

an ugly heart toward the girl. The incident which provoked his anger had just recently occurred, and Bud was stubborn in his grudges.

When Alta first came as a little girl to her uncle's ranch, Bud had been a kind of big brother to her. He was employed by Colonel Morgan; and with the other hands, he had taken delight in teaching her how to ride, to throw a lasso, and to drive the cattle. Alta responded with childlike good-fellowship, accepting his attentions with playful innocence. Bud thought of her as of a mere child at first; but when Alta, after two years at school, came back, no longer a romping little ranch girl but a young lady, beautiful in her budding womanhood, he fell an easy prey to her charms. Presuming on his former associations, he grew ardent toward the girl. Surprised and annoyed at this turn of affairs, Alta tried at first to avoid him; but since he worked at her uncle's ranch, it was hard not to meet him often; and the worse she treated him, the more persistent he grew, forcing his love-making upon her until one day she compelled herself to face it out. Then she told him frankly that if he wanted to keep her friendship, he must stop his love nonsense.

"Friendship!" he blurted out; "I don't want your friendship. If we can't be more'n friends, we can't be anything."

"Well, Bud," she said firmly, "we can't be anything more."

"You won't have me, then?" he half demanded.

"Have you?" Alta's tone showed more than she meant to reveal of her disgust.

Bud's stupid pride was stung. "You damned flirt," he snapped, "if you was a man I'd ——"

"No, you wouldn't, Bud Nixon," Alta checked him; "you're too big a coward. Now don't you dare insult me again or you'll rue it."

This flash of righteous temper took his breath away. He stared stupidly at her, then turned sharply and strode out of the room with jangling spurs. That ended it so far as the love-making was concerned; but it was the beginning of a stupid hate in his heart. He simply caroused about and took delight in becoming chief of the ruffian element in the valley, venting his spite against Alta by tormenting her in rude ways, and making any fellow who dared to pay her attention a target for his enmity and abuse.

Alta's uncle knew nothing about the matter. She spared his feelings by keeping this trouble to herself — a rather hard thing for Alta to

decide, because all of her life she had confided freely in her "dear daddy," as she affectionately called him. But this she knew would anger and worry him and she feared the consequences.

The Colonel, however, did notice that something was wrong with Bud. He began of a sudden to grow reckless and unreliable. This change of disposition in his best hand puzzled and annoyed the ranch owner very much. For Bud had always been a faithful worker, full of energy. As a judge of stock he had few equals, while he could handle horses and cattle with unusual skill. A good deal of the Colonel's success in ranching was due to Nixon's help.

Nixon knew this well enough, and he was a little presumptuous around the place because of it, bossing the other boys, and taking liberties in various ways that no other hand would dare to take. The Colonel did not like this, but out of regard for Bud's good services, he overlooked the fault.

Colonel Morgan, however, was no easy-going manager. Quite the contrary. His military training had made him a strict disciplinarian, and when Bud carried things too far, neglecting his duties to sport about the valley, he received a rather sharp suggestion from his master to mend his ways.

"I'll take keer of myself all right, Colonel, you needn't bother about me," returned Bud, with a touch of insolence in his tone.

"Well, see that you do; and for your own good you had better cut out your rough stuff," returned the Colonel.

"Well, I've allus done my full stint around this ranch, ain't I? and I'm jist as good as any one on it."

"Yes, you've been a good worker and I appreciate what you have done; now just keep on doing your duty and we'll have no trouble," returned the Colonel in kindly tone, ignoring the offensive suggestions in Bud's talk. He desired no break between them.

"All right, boss!" Bud turned and walked away to the corral to pick up some task he had been directed to do.

There was something still in the tone and manner that the old soldier did not like, but he passed it by, hoping that Bud would soon come back to himself.

Instead of this he grew more undependable and arrogant day by day, until the Colonel's patience was about exhausted. He held his feelings in check, however, until Bud brought on the crisis.

Bud was at the dance that night, of course, carrying enough of the bad whisky dispensed

at the races to be ugly and itching for a fight. Everybody knew he was there, too. He danced about boisterously for a time, then sat in the corner telling crude yarns, while the dance whirled on about him. He would not deign to ask Alta to dance with him, but he eyed her closely, and it punished him severely to see her so popular with the boys, so happily careless and beautiful as she glided around the gay room. Once she had caught him watching her, and had nodded smilingly; but receiving only a sullen stare in response, she gave no further attention to him for the rest of the evening until the row came.

It was some time after twelve that the storm broke. The midnight supper scraps had been cleared away and the crowd fell to singing, "We won't go home till mornin'," with lusty voices.

They came very nearly breaking their tuneful resolve, however, much sooner than they expected. It happened in this way. Dick Davis unwittingly precipitated the trouble. According to promise, Alta gave him the first dance, and Dick rather presumed on her partnership for the evening.

"That was a dandy dance," he said as he took her to her seat.

"I enjoyed it," she responded. It was no flattery either; for Dick did dance well. He was rather a handsome fellow, too, with dark hair and eyes. He was of athletic build, rather slender and wiry, graceful of movement, neat in his dress, and possessing the assurance which Fred lacked to make him claim quickly the attention of the girls. Dick's chief faults were his conceit and his fickleness, a hint of which was given by his slightly uptilted nose that detracted somewhat from his otherwise regular countenance.

"I'd sure like another just like it," he suggested; "will you?"

"Why, yes, if you wish it."

So a little while later they waltzed again, while Bud Nixon, who had planted his stockily built body in the corner among some of the bolder girls, still kept close watch of the movements of the graceful couple. The jealous glance that blazed in his dark eyes boded no good for Dick; for Bud was a determined fellow, once he started on a quest. He was reckless too; and this characteristic, backed by his strong body, made him a dangerous enemy.

Dick kept so close to Alta during the dance that Bud gradually grew inwardly furious. He determined to break up the flirting. How to

do it was the problem his thick brain finally worked out. When Dick for the third time led Alta out to dance, Bud jumped up, grabbed the arm of Molly Thompson, who sat near him, giggling over his coarse jokes, and said, "Let's hev a dance, little gal."

Molly was ready enough, and soon they were swinging rapidly around the room. Suddenly, with malice aforethought on Bud's part, they bumped into Dick and Alta. Bud laughed leeringly at his rudeness.

"That's all right for once, pardner," Dick said, threateningly, as they caught the step again. Instinctively he felt that it was not an accident; but he overlooked the challenging insult till Bud bumped into them again with a suddenness that almost upset both him and Alta.

Dick whirled and slapped him in the face. They jumped back. A second later two revolvers flashed and a shot went crashing through the window just over the old fiddler's head.

Both had pulled the trigger, but Dick's hammer snapped on an empty shell; Bud's bullet, sent by a half drunken hand, just touched Dick's ear and shattered the window close to Uncle Toby, who was scraping away sleepily on his fiddle.

"Whoopee!" shouted the old man, jumping as if he had been shot, and tumbling off his seat. There was a sudden rush for the doorway.

Before the assailants could pull trigger again, however, some one had knocked Bud's pistol from his hand, Colonel Morgan had grabbed him, and Jim had jerked Dick's arm down just as his revolver rang out, sending a bullet through Bud's big toe. The bully jumped with a yell of pain and tried to break through the crowd for the door, toward which Colonel Morgan's brawny hand, clutched on his collar, was hustling him. When the way was cleared, the old Colonel gave his crestfallen captive a shove and a kick, saying wrathfully, "Now, get, you damned hoodlum, and don't you ever darken my door again!"

"If I catch you," shouted Dick angrily, "I'll shoot you on sight."

Bud, terrified now and suffering with pain, ran to the shed, jumped on his horse and sped away. Where he went no one knew, and nobody seemed to care.

The panic gradually subsided, and the dance was soon going on as merrily as if nothing had happened. The crowd did not go home till morning; at least the new day was just sending its heralds of light above the hills as the party

broke up with hearty thanks and hand shakes to Rancher Morgan and his niece for the jolly time they had given their neighbors. As a parting salute, the cowboys emptied their revolvers into the air and dashed away with whoops that woke the hillside echoes. The girls struck up —

"Good night, ladies,
Good night, ladies,
Good night, ladies,
We're going to leave you now."

as they rolled along the ranch roads in their buckboards and lumber wagons.

Colonel Morgan and his little girl, with animated faces, stood in the door till the revelry had died away. Then Alta turned to her warm-souled uncle, the only father she had ever known, and giving him a sweet — not good-night, but good-morning kiss, left for her room and lay down to rest. But she could not go to sleep. Her thoughts kept tossing excitedly, till to calm them she arose and went to the window where she stood looking out upon the dawning day, and thinking, thinking.

The events of the night just past had shocked her soul to a new sense of responsibility. She had begun to learn that it is dangerous business to play with the fire of human hearts. She chided herself for being too free with Dick Davis.

What would come of it all? Her sensitive heart was troubled. For Alta Morgan was not a flirt; she was full of life and fun; she liked friends, and she won them quickly by her artless grace and genuine goodness; but though she seemed care-free and merry, her conscience was keen and true. It pained her to hurt any one. She felt more pity than blame for even stupid Bud. But she soothed herself with the feeling that after all, her fault was at worst only a bursting desire for innocent fun; and with this comforting thought she gradually dropped her worries to watch the morning break in peace over her troubled world.

The sunlight was tipping the jagged rim of the eastern mountains with flaming gold, before she threw herself, still in her dainty white but rather crumpled dress, on her couch.

When her uncle came in an hour later, she was still lying there, a quiet smile upon her pretty lips, a trace of tear stain on her cheek, and some withered wild flowers tangled in her silken hair. The Colonel gazed a moment in admiration, then he stepped softly across the room, took a light shawl that hung above her, and after spreading it gently over his "little squirrel" stole from the room, closing the door quietly after him.

Chapter IV

FIRE WATER

THE Bar B ranch was roused that morning by a rowdy, half-tipsy band of cowboys, who dashed up to the old shack just as the sun pushed his blazing face above the eastern peaks.

Dan and Fred were up and had breakfast well under way; for they knew that Pat would not be in any fettle to do the cooking that day.

"Foine gintlemen ye are, may hiven bless ye fer givin' a helpin' hand," Pat called out as he tumbled off his horse.

"Bully boys," echoed Jim, "to stay at home and have breakfast a smokin' fer the fellers that's had the fun. That's just what my good old mother used to do for this rattle-brain boy of hers."

"Gee, but I'm sleepy!" said Dick, throwing his head on the saddle he had just jerked from his pony.

"No wonder at all, at all," returned Jim, "but brighten up, Dickie, and take your rations;

you can't doze off and dream of fancy girls about here to-day."

Dick was asleep before the sermon was finished. Seeing this, Jim filled a cup with cold water and dashed it in the sleeper's face. Dick jumped up, sputtering and grumbling sleepily, "Oh, cheese it, Jimmie! Let a feller snooze a little."

"No snooze for the wicked," returned Jim, while they all laughed at Dick's discomfiture; "and you've been mighty wicked to flirt with pretty Alta, and shoot poor Bud in the toes. What do you say, boys, first fellow that goes to sleep again to-day gets soused in the creek?"

"Good enough," shouted the boys.

That settled it. The crowd had to keep awake all day, though it was a sore trial to most of them. But cowboys must get used to that sort of thing, especially during the roundup days, when it often happens that the work means riding all day and herding all night.

To-day, however, it was not the roundup, but a "barn-raising" that called for the help of all hands and the cook. Captain Hanks was anxious to get the big barn up before haying time came, and it took a great deal of muscle to raise the heavy timber.

"Now, all together — yo-hee!" the foreman would shout to the boys ranged along the great logs, and with much straining and puffing they slowly lifted them into place, one on top of the other.

Between lifts the sleepy ones would tumble back on the grass, amusing themselves with poking fun at one another. The dance gave them enough to talk about. But the one thing that touched them off again and again into spasms of laughter was the suggestion of Uncle Toby's tumble from his fiddler's perch, and Bud's yell and flight.

"Now all together, yo-hee!" Captain Hanks shouted for the twentieth time that day. The log was beginning slowly to rise when Jim suddenly let go his hold and yelled, "Now, altogether — whoopee!"

The crowd collapsed, sinking to the ground with the big log on top of them.

"You fellows must have had a high time last night," said Fred, "the fuss you make about it."

"Bully time it was, Teddy," returned Jim; "why didn't you turn up and help swing the ranch lassies off their feet?"

"Oh, the kid's not of our kind," sneered Dick; "you wouldn't catch him swinging the girls."

"Don't be too sure about that, Dick," retorted Fred; "I'll just take in the next dance to show you how."

"Good fer you, me boy," said Pat, "and we'll leave Dick home to do the cookin', next toime."

"You'll go damned hungry if you do," snapped Dick.

"Oh, well, me boy, oh well," Pat broke out singing:

It's divil a rap do I care,
It's divil a rap do I care,
As long as a drap is left, is left,
In the old demijohn next mornin'.

"That reminds me," said Cap Hanks, "there's a demijohn under my bunk, Pat; go get it. The boys need a drop to keep 'em awake to-day."

"I'm off," said Pat, jogging away to the old shack. He found a gallon jug of choice old rye where the foreman had said, and was soon back to the barn.

"Now do the honors, cook," said Hanks, "the treat's on me."

"You're a gintleman!" said Pat, pouring out and passing round the whisky. When his turn came he took a long drink, rubbing his stomach with his free hand the while, then smacking his lips, he raised his eyes and said solemnly, "Hiven at last."

When the laughter that greeted Pat's performance subsided, Jim said, "You'd better watch out, Dicky, or Teddy here will be leadin' you a merry chase after your ranch lassie."

"Yes," added Pat; "you know that the loikes of ye can't talk poetry, and Teddy can."

"Oh, I'll risk it; he's harmless," returned Dick.

"Don't you be too sure; you can't tell how far a toad can jump by his looks," said Jim dryly; "and remember you promised to make me boss when old Morgan deeds the ranch to you."

"Hip, hooray!" broke in Pat, "what bloomin' circus is this a-comin'?" Everybody looked up.

"A bunch of Injuns, by ginger!" said Cap Hanks; "I hope they won't pitch their wickiups about here. They'll beg the boots off our feet."

"They're heading this way," said Dan.

"Holy mither, defind us poor sinners," said Pat in mock fright. "Me head is bald as a button already; it's no ither scalp I have to spare."

"Hike to the shack with that whisky, Pat," said the foreman, "and put it out of sight."

"Right ye are, Captain"; Pat grabbed up the demijohn and dashed off. When inside the shack he took another drink, then placing the jug in the cupboard, returned to see the In-

dians, who were trailing along slowly toward the waiting cowboys.

"Looks like old Copperhead's band," said Dan. "Dave Johnson told me they were in the valley."

"Yes, and they hev been slaughterin' game; the warden's watchin' 'em," added one of the boys.

"Them Redskins 'll stir up trouble in this country yet," said Cap Hanks; "they'll get mean when the new game laws are pulled on 'em. But Dave says he's going to do it."

The Indians by this time were filing past the ranch gate a few rods from the barn. A frowsled, straggly band it was, but picturesque withal, with its rough herd of vari-colored ponies, ragged, wolfish dogs, towsled, half-clad papooses, squaws in bright but tattered calicoes, and sober bucks, decked in spangled and fringed buckskins, with gay blankets.

The cowboys, out of curiosity, had dropped their work and gone to the gate to get a closer look at the dusky travelers.

"Hullo! Where now?" called Cap Hanks to the leader.

"Maybe so over there," returned the chief, lifting his head and looking upward across the eastern mountains.

"Maybe so catchum elk, huh?" Hanks suggested in a significant tone of voice.

The chief scowled, but said nothing.

"Maybe so game man catchum Injun," Dick put in smartly.

"Huh!" snapped the chief angrily; "maybe so white man put elk here, huh?"

"Oh, hold on, Chief, don't get mad," said Cap Hanks. "White man no stingy; let Injun kill all he needs to eat, but no heap kill 'em for buckskin."

Old Copperhead's eyes flashed. "What white man kill 'em for? Not meat, not buckskin. Heap fun. White man let Injun be, Injun let white man be. You savey?" With an angry jerk of the rein, he whirled his pony and started off when Dick, full of mischief, broke out again by jerking a flask from his pocket and saying, "Here, big Injun, maybe this cool 'em down; you likem whisky, huh?"

"You smart fool!" Dan rebuked him, "put that stuff up. They're chuck full of the devil all ready. Hell only knows what they'd do if they got whisky down their black throats."

Dick took the cut without a word, and put the bottle back, but not before the Indian had caught sight of it.

The suggestion was enough to wake their thirst; but they filed away sulkily behind their

chief, and pitched their tepees across the ford on the flat near an aspen grove.

Later in the day several of the bucks came back, ostensibly to swap things with the cowboys, who were gathered about the old shack, Hanks having let them quit work somewhat earlier than usual. Pat was getting things ready for supper when they rode up. The Indians began to beg for tea, sugar, and everything else in sight, but they didn't make much headway with Pat.

Finally one of them caught sight of a flask projecting from the Irishman's hip pocket and said, "Gimme fire water."

"Go way wid ye!" snapped Pat.

"Injun give gloves for bottle," the buck went on, reaching out a gaudily beaded pair.

"Not a bloomin' drap," returned Pat in decided tones.

"Give shirt and gloves," persisted the buck.

"Go long wid ye!" Pat grew stubborn.

"Give pony!"

"Not a drap, ye spalpeen! Didn't I tell ye?"

"Oh, let the poor devil have a swig to quench his thirst," said Jim; "why don't ye?"

"Why don't I?" echoed Pat. "Why, the likes of it! And can't ye see it's the last swig in me bottle? D'ye think I'd let that red devil

have it when me own throat's a-parchin'?" He had uncorked and raised the bottle while he spoke and now he drained it before the thirsty eyes of the Indians. Then tossing the bottle to the begging buck, who caught it eagerly, he said, "There! I'll not be stingy wid ye. Take the last swate smell."

But while the boys were roaring over Pat's actions, another act was being performed with no audience to watch. One of the bucks, unnoticed, had slipped into and out of the shack. His blanket might have appeared bulgy, if one had looked closely, but the boys paid no attention to it.

After the Redskins had gone, however, Cap Hanks went to the cupboard for a good-night toddy and found his gallon jug of choice old rye gone. Immediately there was an uproar of swearing and accusation, which resulted in rightly placing the blame on the Indians.

But a greater roar followed shortly after dusk, when the drunken bucks began to make night hideous over among the wickiups. The yelling and screaming of the bucks, the frightened squaws and papooses, shocked the silent valley.

"It's the devil's own fun that's up," said Cap Hanks as he half rose from his bunk to listen.

"Let's go over and see the circus," said Dick.

"Not for me," returned Cap Hanks. "You need some of the smartness taken out of you, so you'd better try it. The thing I'm going to do is to get my breeches on and load my gun. There's no tellin' what might happen."

The other boys followed the suggestion. Then they lay down again to listen rather nervously to the yelling and shrieking that cut fitfully through the murmur of the trees and the sound of the stream. It was only a faint suggestion of the savage orgie that was being enacted around the wigwam fires by the whisky crazed bucks and terrified squaws and little ones. The suggestion of what might come to them sobered the crowd of cowboys. They had little to say as they lay listening till things grew calm again. It was nearly daybreak, however, before they had all quieted into sleep.

Chapter V

FISHERMAN'S LUCK

THE summer days that followed the Indian mêlée were always counted by Fred as among the richest of his life. His task was to herd the blooded stock.

"Keep 'em on good feed, and keep 'em away from the common cattle," Cap Hanks had ordered him. Fred did not neglect his duty, but he found many hours when the cattle herded themselves. While they rested during mid-day or browsed on the open flat, he had time to fish, to hunt chickens, to explore the wilds, or when tired, to throw himself on the grassy banks near the stream and enjoy "Scottish Chiefs" or the "Leather Stocking Tales," which Dan, who was a lover of good books, had generously lent to him.

Hanks rather admired the boy for his book habits, but in practical fashion he had warned him not to lose his head "fightin' imaginary Injuns" and lose his cows.

"It's all right, boy," he said, "to hev your

head in the clouds sometimes, but allus keep your feet on the ground."

His fishing and hunting the foreman not only condoned but encouraged, especially after Fred had brought in his first big string of salmon trout. Straightway the boy, on motion of Pat, was "illected chief fisherman fer the ranch," and excused from haying, herding, or any other regular job so long as he kept the cook supplied "wid the spickled beauties." So fishing came to be regarded as part of Fred's business.

Dick insinuated occasionally that the kid had "a soft snap"; but nobody else complained, and no one even guessed half the fun that Fred was having.

The splendid mountain stream was a never-ending delight. He followed it in all its crystal windings, over gravelly beds, where the trout loved to play, through shadowy, quiet depths, where the fish slept on silken fins; he learned all its windings through the cottonwood and aspen groves, around the willowy bends, and the meadowy stretches. The stream was always clear, sparkling, teeming with wild life, full of pleasant and sometimes unpleasant surprises.

Often as he slipped quietly toward a trout hole, half holding his breath for fear of scaring the fish, he himself would get a scare as a great

sand hill crane or a blue heron would give a startled cry and go thrashing its wings to rise and sail away. Once as he swung hurriedly around a curve of willows to come suddenly upon a kind of bayou, a thousand ducks shocked the air with startled quacking and splashing and whir of wings. Many a time he came upon a fan-tailed deer, which, rudely roused from its rest, would leap to its feet and, giving one wild look, bound away to a willowy cover.

But trout fishing was the best sport of all. The fish were plentiful, but they were just game enough to keep a fisherman's wits alive. Oh, the fun of it!— to cast the singing line, to watch the tempting fly skim the ripples, to see the trout leap and grab it, and then with breath-taking suspense, to land him — sometimes! And oh the disappointment that often came when some beauty — always the biggest — would suddenly flip free of the biting hook and dive back into the quiet depths to safety.

Then the search for new trout holes, where no fisherman had ever been, always an impelling desire in Fred, brought many rich experiences. Some of these, however, were far from joyful. Once, indeed, the boy came within a breath of paying with his life for this desire to find the unknown. He trembled always to think how he

might have gone to a watery grave in a place where there was small chance that he would ever have been found.

It happened while he was hunting through Mystery Grove, as he called it, for a new hole to fish. The creek was high, and in this place, it plunged through the tall timber, so dense with fallen logs and undergrowth that he had to fight for an opening into the thicket. With rod held like a guiding spear in one hand, and with a string of fish in the other, the lone fisherman made his way yard by yard along the foaming creek. Finally he spied a promising place some rods ahead; but he could not get at it from that side of the stream.

How to cross was a problem. Nature came suddenly to his help to solve it. A few steps farther on, three trees, washed loose by the water, had fallen. Two of the trees were saplings. They reached clear over the stream. The other was a larger log, but it came only partly across. Fred figured that if he could get to the biggest tree, he would have a safe bridge the rest of the way.

With gingerly steps, he balanced along the swaying saplings till within stepping distance of the largest tree, then he stepped confidently, throwing his full weight upon it. Down it sank with him into the angry stream.

How he did it, he never could tell, but as he went down, he flung fish and rod to the bank and just saved himself from being washed under by catching his arms across the log. And there he hung, legs and body under, head and arms above, hooking on to the log, while the stream swirled and swished about him. He struggled to get back out of the strong, sucking current. It seemed impossible. Once he almost decided to let go and trust to luck to bring him out of the waves on the other side; but just below the logs, the stream dived with angry hiss and roar under great clawing roots. To have become entangled in those horrid, watery claws was death itself.

Breathing a silent prayer for help, he tried once more. One lunge brought him back a little, another and another put him partly above the fallen trees, and then he slowly lifted himself with greater ease to safety. He crawled along the poles to the bank where he lay for a few moments, and then, without even a glance at the new trout hole, he gathered up his few fish and his tackle and made his way painfully out of the woods. He had fished enough for that day.

But the surprises that the old stream gave him were not all so fearful. A few days after his mishap he had another experience that remained with him a golden memory always.

He was fishing the ripples just above Shadow Pool, eager to catch a big trout he had seen there many times, marked by a black spot just behind its gills, when he was startled by a splashing in the stream just above him. Whirling suddenly, he found himself facing Alta Morgan on her dapple-gray pony. Her bright eyes were laughing as she called out cheerily, "Good morning! What luck?"

"Haven't counted yet; about a dozen, I guess."

"Surely not; where?"

"Oh, you think I'm telling fish stories, do you? Well, I'll show up." He stepped to a shady side pool, and lifted from it a long willow, strung with speckled beauties.

"Fine!" she cried; "you are surely a fisherman."

"Oh, I sometimes get a few. What's your luck?" Fred glanced at the rod she held.

"I don't like to confess."

"Why not?"

"You'd know why if you took a peep into my basket." She opened it as she spoke laughingly and showed — not a fish.

"You certainly haven't loaded your pony," said Fred; "but say, I can soon make things look better — if you'll let me." He reached up his string.

"Oh, no," protested the girl, "you shame me. It's very good of you, but —"

"Now look here," Fred interrupted her, "you mustn't say no. It's my chance to pay up. Please play fair and take them."

"Pay up, play fair," echoed Alta. "What do you mean?"

"Don't you remember that you caught my mare the other day and saved me a long chase?"

"Oh, yes, sure enough," she laughed.

"Now take these fish as part pay, won't you?"

"I didn't do it for pay, but I'll take the gift because you really want me to — and because I need them to win a bet."

"Bet! How's that?"

"Oh, Uncle and I made a wager to-day that I shouldn't get a trout. It's my first attempt at fishing, you see. Now I'll have some fun and win his dollar. May I pretend I caught these? It wouldn't be such an awful fib, would it?"

"Why you did catch them," Fred put in helpfully — "with a lasso, didn't you?" They laughed merrily at the suggestion.

"But say," added he, "I have a better plan to square things with your conscience. You can land a trout for sure. I'll show you how — if you'll let me."

"Let you! Won't I though?" She slipped off Eagle's back in eagerness to try.

"Well, take my rod and let's steal around this bend to another pool. They won't bite here, because we've scared them. Anyway, Old Solomon wouldn't bite whether he's scared or not."

"Old Solomon? I don't understand you."

"It's only a wise old trout I've tried to tempt in half a hundred ways. Perhaps I can show him to you, when we return. He's marked and he's a beauty; but he won't bite. Come on."

"All right." Her voice was joyous with anticipation.

"Now, be quiet." Fred led the way along the willowy trails. "There's a good chance — see where the ripples smooth into that quiet pool. Just cast your fly on the dancing waters and skim it over them."

Alta tried to follow directions, but unskilled in handling a line, she landed her hook, not on the ripples, but into a willow snag.

"Oh, pshaw! now I've spoiled it all," she exclaimed.

"Sh'," cautioned the boy, "that's only fisherman's luck." He loosened the line quickly. "Now try again."

The second fling brought better results. With a tiny splash, the fly struck the water, and

danced down the ripples. It had hardly reached the quieter waters when a lusty trout grabbed it.

"Oh, oh!" she cried, "I've caught one!"

"Not yet," Fred warned her; "be careful."

The words were scarcely off his lips when flip! the empty hook shot into the air, and a scared trout shot back into the pool.

"Oh, dear! that's just wicked"; her tone was full of disappointment.

"Never mind," her companion consoled her; "half the fish we do catch get away, you know. Try again, now, but don't get so excited and jerk so hard next time."

She cast her line again but without results; again and again she cast, but no fish rose. Discouragement began to show in her face.

"Maybe we have scared them out," suggested Fred, as she flung once more across the ripples.

Like a flash to answer his doubt, there came a second splash of the waters. Another trout had grabbed the fly.

"Keep cool now," the boy cautioned her; "he's hooked solidly; you'll land him if you keep steady."

He stepped toward the bank to give help if needed, while Alta, a picture of mingled joy,

suspense, and eagerness, slowly drew the struggling, splashing trout toward the shore. Then with a deft flip of the curving rod, she tossed it ten feet or more up the bank. Dropping her rod, she danced and clapped her hands in childlike delight, while Fred, whose heart was dancing too, unloosed the hook.

"There, now, your bet is fairly won," he said.

"Oh, this is jolly!" she responded; "Uncle will be glad to give me that dollar, he'll be so proud of me." Then she added graciously, "How can I ever thank you for this?"

"Don't try. It's the best fun I've had to-day. Do you want to catch another?"

"Yes, indeed; but not now. It's getting nearly dinner time. Uncle would worry if I'm away too long. Perhaps I'll come again some time. May I? It's splendid sport. Do you fish here much?"

"Yes, indeed, come any time. I try my luck nearly every day, whenever the cattle are quiet."

"Well, don't be surprised to see me again soon. Come, Eagle," she called to her pony, and when he came, she reached to open her basket.

"Here, let me pack in the fish for you," said Fred; "I'll put yours on top so you can tell it."

"Yes, but you mustn't give me all of those fish," she protested.

"Now, please don't object," he replied, as he kept on filling the basket; "you said you'd take them; now let me have my way this time, won't you?"

"All right, if you insist," she laughed, "and I'll pretend I stopped fishing because I couldn't get any more in the basket. It's full to the cover now."

He tied it securely to the horn of the saddle, and was holding the stirrup for her to mount, when she reached out her hand, saying, "Thank you ever so much for this rich treat. I'll not forget it. Now may I ask for one thing more?"

"Certainly; what is it?"

"Your name."

"Oh, Fred — Fred Benton."

"Well, Mr. Fred, I don't like you one bit"; her tone was mischievous.

"Why not?"

"You broke your promise with me. Why didn't you come to our dance?"

"Oh — well — I ! really, Miss Morgan — I —"

"There now, no excuses, you didn't want to come."

"Please let me explain."

"Go on then."

"Well, I was out hunting, you remember, and in my scouting up through the foothills, I ran on to an old mountaineer. I got so interested listening to his stories, that, before I realized it, it was sundown and when I reached home it was so late I was ashamed to go to the dance; but really I wanted to go."

"Not very much, I'm afraid."

"Now, please don't. We are to be good friends, aren't we?"

"I hope so, but you'd better not treat my invitations so lightly after this. There's another dance to be given soon. Will you come?"

"Yes, I promise —"

"Don't promise, just come," she said lightly, then — "Say, tell me more about the old mountaineer. What does he look like?"

"He is tall and straight, with long hair and beard and the kindest of eyes and voice — you would like him I know. He lives in the cosiest little cabin in a pretty dell; you ought to see it."

"I'm interested; take me there — oh! — pardon me — I —"

"No pardon needed. I'll be delighted to do it."

"When can we go?"

"Any time you say. Do you like to shoot?"

"I've never tried it. Will you teach me how?"

"It's fun to teach you. Say, I'll tell you."

"What?"

"Let's go on a chicken hunt and visit the old mountaineer together?"

"Fine! I'll do it; but I must be going now or Uncle will worry about me. Good-by."

"Good-by," he responded, as she turned Eagle's head toward the trail. The little horse leaped up the bank at her touch. With a wave of her hand she disappeared among the willows.

The boys at the ranch missed their usual trout supper that night and they joked Fred about failing to do his duty. He took their flings good-naturedly; but he never let out a word to tell what became of the best string of fish he ever caught.

Chapter VI

ANKANAMP

IT was a gloomy night. The sun had gone down in a bank of black clouds. The lightning was playing above the western hills, and the thunder was beginning to grumble. The lightning flashed more sharply; a wind swept across the valley; the rain began to patter, then to pour; the lightning leaped flash upon flash out of the inky sky, while closely following every stroke came the cracking, booming thunder. The storm was on in all its fury, driving through the swaying trees and drenching the group of silent wigwams that stood ghostlike within the edge of an aspen grove at the foot of the eastern mountains.

Every dusky head was sheltered beneath the smoky canvas. No sign of life was about except the shaggy and dejected herd of squaw ponies which stood with backs hunched up and dripping tails turned toward the driving rain. Most of the Indians had rolled themselves in their blankets and were sound asleep despite the roaring storm.

But within a certain wigwam there was unrest. Had one raised the rain-soaked door-flap, one might have seen in the dull glow of the dying coals, several dusky forms squatted about the fire, while another, rolled in a blanket, lay near.

This one seemed to be in distress, for he tossed about from time to time. Once as the light blazed a little he threw himself with face toward the fire, which lit up his features and showed him to be not an Indian, but a white man. He mumbled something, and a squaw who was watching the sick man closely stepped to his side and gave him a drink of water. Then he rose to a sitting posture and began to rub his leg.

"Too tight, heap hurt," he half groaned.

"Better soon," his dusky nurse said comfortingly, while she loosened the bandages to ease his sorely wounded foot, saying as she did so, "Lie down, heap sleep, soon well."

The patient heeded only part of the advice; he threw himself back into his blanket muttering, "Ugh, heap hurt!" then grinding his teeth savagely, he added, half to himself, "I'll fix the devils that put me in this fix."

"Maybe so killum white man, huh?" grunted one of the bucks sitting near.

"Shoot 'em like dogs," was the bitter reply.

"Injun heap mad at cow men," came the suggestive rejoinder.

The sufferer, as will be easily guessed, was Bud Nixon. Luck had flung him among the Indians shortly after his precipitate departure from Morgan's dance. A kind of stupid, stubborn pride had kept him from turning to any of the ranchers for help, though any one of them would have given cheerfully the assistance his distress called for. Rather than ask it, however, he wandered on aimlessly trying to show his grit, until, overcome by loss of blood, he swooned and fell from his horse.

How long he lay in this faint he did not know. Luckily for him, two Indian hunters, following the mountain trail he had taken, found him stretched out, pale and bleeding, while his trusty horse cropped at the grass a few rods away. These dusky good Samaritans soon revived the wounded man and took him back to camp, where they left him in charge of old Towano, their medicine man, whose power to heal the sick was held in superstitious awe by the tribe, though the modern physicians would no doubt scoff at such clumsy attempts at healing as he used.

It proved good fortune, however, for Bud that he was given help of any kind soon. His

neglect of his wound had already brought on a fever, and blood poison was threatening. The medicine man did his best with incantations to drive the disease away. It is doubtful, however, that his rattling, juggling tricks helped much. The faithful nursing of the white patient's foot by Towano's old squaw was no doubt the help that put him, after a few days, on the way to recovery. But these were bitter days for Bud at best. To suffer such indignity at the hands of his friends, to be shot and kicked out into the night, and finally to be forced to lie like a beggar among Redskins, taking their nauseating doses, their coarse food, the dirt and discomfort of their wickiups, in storm and shine, — all this rankled in his soul as he lay convalescing, and filled his heart with hate and a stubborn resolve to get revenge.

In this state of wrath, Bud's slow brain was rather quickened to see and seize upon the suggestion of co-operative enmity that the Indians occasionally threw out. They were already full of anger towards the warden and the ranchers. The persistent encroachment of the cattlemen on their hunting grounds, and their threats to enforce irritating game laws had put the Indians in an ugly mood. It would

have taken but little to precipitate open warfare with all the horrors of massacre and plunder.

Bud was in a state of mind, however, not to reck at consequences. His brain was too unimaginative to picture ahead. He lived only an animal-like existence from day to day. It was an opportunity he saw to pay up his enemies with brutal interest. The idea gradually possessed him; but for the present he said nothing, lying low and nursing his hate by recalling the pictures of Alta Morgan's refusal, of Dick Davis's triumph, and the derisive contempt of the whole crowd.

One afternoon as the white patient was lying under the trees near the tepee the Indians had built for him, several young bucks came over to talk with him. They were evidently in a fever of subdued excitement. About an hour before, they had dashed into camp and Nixon heard them talking rather loudly with wild gesticulations, to their old chief; but he could only make out something about game men. They did not offer any explanation now, being still a little afraid to trust the white man who had fallen in with them.

"What's up?" asked Nixon; "game warden been after you?"

"That's it," responded Flying Arrow, a young chieftain; "heap chase Injuns this morning, but no ketch 'em."

"Oh, he's no good; he needs killin'."

"You think so," the Indian responded; "you no like him."

"Naw, he's a squaw killer. Why didn't you shoot him?"

"Injun no want trouble; white man better let Injun alone"; the chief's tone was threatening.

"White man has no business stopping you from killing all the deer you want. I'd put a bullet through him if he tried to stop me. What did he do to you?"

"Heap chase 'em Injuns — that's all. No ketch 'em. Bucks dodge. Some go this way through trees, some that";—the chief made his story very vivid by expressive gesticulations. "Drop deer in creek. Run up creek, no tracks, long way round to wickiups. No see 'em game man any more. Maybe so lose him in trees."

"Well, he'll be sneakin' round again, don't worry. He wants to play heap smart, put Injun in jail, get heap money. You'd better kill the devil. If you don't, he'll get you."

The Indians, usually reticent, grew more and more talkative as they found in their white

companion one who held bitter grievances against their enemies. Especially was this the case with the hot-blooded ones of the band. For there are Indians and Indians, some always keen for trouble, others peaceful and law-abiding by nature. But all of the tribe were more or less restive at this time.

Bud's first plans to get even with those against whom his grudge was fiercest contemplated no bloodshed. His main thought was to annoy and harass his foes in some ugly way without risk to himself. The scheme of doing it gradually took shape in his brain. He had been the chief bully of the valley, why not be chief of a band of Indians? It would be an easy trick to lead such a band into all sorts of mischief. Knowing every foot of the ground and all of the people concerned, he could readily raid the ranches, steal cattle and horses, set fire to their stacks, or cut up other kinds of deviltry to torment those on whom he would glut his revenge.

The chance to promote his plot was not hard to find. Let one but strike with energy to realize a strong desire for good or ill, it is surprising how the force draws like a magnet and magnetizes like metal all about it.

The days that Bud lay convalescing he used to the advantage of his plan. By card playing

and gambling with the young bucks, he soon established a close fellowship. They naturally took to his leadership, and he had soon so gained their confidence that he felt safe to suggest his plan to Flying Arrow, one of the leading young Indians, straight as an arrow and as light and swift, with keen but not unkindly eyes. The plot found favor with this daring brave rather because it was electric with possibilities, than because of any deep-seated grudge he bore the whites. Through this young chief it was spread to several others of like spirit. They took to it also with avidity, and before Old Copperhead was aware of it, there was formed within his band a kind of secret coalition of dare-devils, bent upon excitement and incidentally revenge toward the whites.

It is doubtful whether the old chief would have permitted such a thing had he known in time to nip it in the bud. He was wise enough to foresee some of its consequences. When he did get a hint of what was doing, it had gone rather too far to check easily; besides, his own hate of the whites made his objections to the scheme only half-hearted. He, therefore, chose the politic way of dealing with the matter by letting things take their course, allowing

the band to leave on their pretended hunting expeditions whenever they chose, and asking no questions about the kind of meat they brought back, a goodly share of which was always left at his wickiup. Nor did he count his ponies often to take stock of the increase in the herd. Secretly the old chief was rather gloating because of the advantage he was getting over his enemies.

The cattlemen did not miss any stock at first; for the thieving band worked very slyly; and it was not the time for rounding up the cattle and horses. Besides, the Indians had a leader who knew well the ground and the game.

Emboldened by success, the marauders grew in numbers and in daring. Bud Nixon was soon glorying in a command big enough to be dangerous, and feeding his stupid soul the while with anticipation of richer revenge. "Ankanamp," or Red Foot, was the Indian name given to the White Chief.

Even Old Copperhead was beginning to admire his new ally, and planning to make him a real Injun by bringing about a marriage with one of the Indian maidens.

He little knew what Bud's brain had plotted along that line. No less a mate than the belle of the valley would suit him. Let her once

fall into his power he would bring the proud minx to terms. To that end, he had a scheme of his own that he never divulged to any of his followers. It was to be the culmination of all his desires and his deviltry. How his plot worked out we shall learn later.

Chapter VII

MOUNTAINEER MEMORIES

IT was July twenty-fourth, the day on which, some forty years before, the Mormon Pioneers had entered the valley of the Great Salt Lake. A colony of these people, who had settled a few miles to the south of the Bar B ranch, had decided to celebrate the occasion. The program looked promising of a good time. It was to begin with a pageant depicting scenes of the early days and close with a banquet in the aspen grove, followed by a "grand ball." Everybody in the valley, regardless of religious affiliations, was urged to participate in the celebration.

Cap Hanks, yielding to the solicitations of his men, therefore declared the day a holiday for all hands and the cook. Fred, however, made a plan of his own for the day. He awoke early that morning before the stars had faded, and while the rest were asleep he slipped out of bed, caught and saddled his mare and rode away toward the eastern hills.

The air was delightfully crisp as the breezes began to pour out of the canyon down from the snowy peaks. It was a joy to be alive if only to drink deeply of the mountain ozone, sweet with the mingled fragrance of pines and flowers and grasses; the old stream seemed snappier and fresher than ever as Brownie splashed into its clear cold waters across the old ford. Nature was yet asleep. Only the whispering of the trees and the singing of the stream could be heard. But as they climbed the trail up the foothills, live things began to waken. First a sleepy "cheep-cheep" of some little song-bird out of the streamside willows, then a far away yelping of the coyotes, and suddenly from under Brownie's pattering feet an old sage hen sprang into the air with frightened clucking. A moment later the whole flock arose, shocking the stillness with their noises. By the time he had reached the hill crest before the old trapper's home, the first streaks of day had appeared above he mountain, and the morning star, a spot of flaming silver against the sky, was melting in the reddening glow of the dawn.

Old Tobe gave a sharp, challenging bark as Brownie's feet rattled the gravel down the trail.

"Who's there?" called Uncle Dave from within the cabin as the boy rode up.

"Fred Benton," came the response; "I hope I haven't disturbed you."

"No, come in; I was just crawlin' out."

Fred tied his mare to a sapling and entered the cabin.

"What brings you here so airly, boy?" asked the old man.

"Oh, we have a day off to celebrate with the Mormons."

"Mormons?" Uncle Dave's tone was curious.

"Yes, it's their Pioneer Day,— the day Brigham Young and his band entered Salt Lake Valley, and the colonists here are celebrating, so Cap Hanks gave us a day off to join in the fun."

"But you're not joinin' 'em?"

"No, I don't like some kinds of cowboy fun," returned Fred frankly; "I thought I'd rather have another visit with you."

"That's good of you, boy, to remember an old man," responded Uncle Dave with a touch of feeling. "I'll get a bite of breakfast; your ride has whetted your appetite, I reckon."

"This air would give anyone an appetite," said Fred; "what can I do to help?"

"You might get the fire going."

Fred stepped outside for wood and brought back with his armful a sack he had untied from his saddle.

"Here's something to help out," he said, emptying half a dozen fine fish on to the table. "I had a good catch yesterday and thought you'd like some."

"Much obliged, boy; trout tastes good once in a while, and I ain't took time to get any lately."

The breakfast preparations went on briskly. When all was ready, the old man said, "Now set up and be at home." Then he offered his brief grace and they ate in silence for a few minutes.

"My mother learnt me to pray, boy," said Uncle Dave quietly; "she allus said it was the right thing to do, and I've proved it. You know a man that lives in these wilds alone as I hev these forty-odd years has to get close to God fer comfort. It's a good thing, boy, to keep the trail between you and Him clèar. I once seen it proved, too, by them pioneers you was speaking of."

Fred was interested.

"I met 'em in a peculiar way when they wuz comin' here," the old man went on; "they called me God's good angel, and I guess they wusn't

far from right; but I'd mighty nigh forgot the whole thing till you reminded me of it."

"Tell me about it, Uncle Dave,"— the old man had paused.

"Well, it wuz this way, you see; I wuz huntin' and trappin' and tradin' along Green River during the late forties, barterin' my skins to old Jim Bridger. One day I left my camp and wuz startin' up the hills to scare up some sage hens fer dinner, when somethin' said to me, 'Go up the river.' That didn't seem right; I begin to argue with myself that the chickens wouldn't be up the river that time o' day, but the notion came again, 'Go up the river.' I stopped kind o' puzzled, then laughin' to myself fer bein' so foolish, I started off again up the hills, when the feelin' came the third time, 'Go up the river,' and I turned without any more arguin' to do what I was told. Yes, what I wuz told, boy; fer if I wuz to live a thousand years I'd never believe any different. I larnt that day, if never before, that God does hear prayers when they're sent up right.

"I hadn't walked far when I seen somethin' across the river that looked curious. It wasn't animals — it was men — men on their knees, 'bout six of them in a circle. I supposed at first they wuz havin' dinner, but they wa'n't any

signs o' camp about and they had their hats off; looked like they wuz prayin', and so they wuz.

"Then I looked up the river and jest across from them, 'most ashore on a sand bar, was somethin' else that looked like a dead man. I hurried up the bank and saw thet it was a dead man — anyway I thought so till I waded out and looked him over. He wa'n't dead, but he was mighty near drowned. I dragged him to a drier place on the bar and worked to bring him to. Bimeby he got enough life in him to tell me what had happened.

"The men on the other bank were shoutin' to me all the while, but I couldn't make out what they said, fer the river was roarin', it bein' high water. But this man told me that they wuz Mormon Battalion boys tryin' to ketch up with Brigham Young's band of pioneers. They had come up too late to get 'em on the far side of the river, and the ferryboat was left on the side I was. So he had tried to swim the stream on a horse, but the horse was drowned, and he had just barely made it across by half swimmin' and bein' washed by the current on to the bar where I found him.

"Well, we soon made it up to the ferry and swung the old flatboat back to the men. They

were so glad they laughed and cried and called me God's good angel sent in answer to their prayers. They hadn't had anything to eat fer two days, fer they had been expectin' to ketch the pioneers sooner and hadn't stocked up with much grub at Fort Laramie.

"We hurried across the river again and followed the fresh pioneer trail fer about a mile, and there we found 'em camped jest beyend the bluffs of the river. It was a happy meetin', I tell you. Their leader, Brigham Young, jest hugged the hungry men. As fer me, they couldn't get over thankin' me, though I hadn't done nothin' worth fussin' 'bout. They fed me with the best they had and asked me all sorts of questions 'bout the country 'fore I left 'em.

"I tell you, boy, there's somethin' in prayer. It's a good thing to keep the trail between you and God clear."

The story seemed to open a vein of rich memories in the old mountaineer's mind. Fred plied him with eager questions and listened rapt in interest as Uncle Dave told of his experiences in the western wilds. His old heart, warmed by the youthful spirit that drew him out, became youthful again as he lived over the days gone by.

It was long past noon before either realized how the day had slipped away. Fred rose to

go, saying appreciatively, "My, but I have enjoyed this fun. It has been a real pioneer day for me, Uncle Dave."

"Glad you come up, boy; but ye ain't goin' yet, air ye?"

"Yes, I must be off now; I've made a promise to join in the fun that's coming to-night."

"Thet's right; keep yer promise, but come again."

"I will," said the boy, as he turned Brownie up the trail toward home.

Chapter VIII

REMEMBERING THE EARLY DAYS

THE celebration was going merrily when Fred rode up to the "Ward House," a large log structure set prominently among the scattered cabins that made the new village. It was used for all public gatherings by the Mormon colonists.

He was not very late, however; for Dan, who stayed at home as usual, had taken a brotherly interest and insisted that Brownie be given a rest while Fred ride Chief, Dan's best saddle horse. This was a rare privilege; but Dan went further. When Fred had opened his old valise to find clothes fit for the occasion, he revealed so scant a wardrobe that his friend, without seeming to see the lack, threw up the till of his own well-stocked trunk and urged the boy to help himself.

"Oh, come, now; no foolishness," he said imperatively, as Fred protested.

"I know you haven't had any money to blow in on cowboy finery. I used to do it, though; and these are some of the leavings of my sporty

days; now help yourself. They're not much use to me any more." Dan did not tell what had sobered him. The death of his sweetheart a few years before had cast a lasting shadow over his life.

The shame of shining in borrowed plumes was largely lost in such open-hearted generosity, and Fred, under his companion's insistence and selection, soon found himself a smartly dressed cowboy indeed. He could hardly voice his thanks as he mounted Chief to ride away.

The night was brilliant with stars; the moon had not yet risen, but was sending its promises of a beautiful night by tipping the dark hills with silver. The air, fresh and fragrant, turned to a gentle breeze as Chief, taking the bits, leaped along the echoing road. It was an exquisite ride. Fred let the fine horse keep his own swift pace till suddenly he galloped out of the timber that lined the creek, and the lights of the village flashed before him.

It was easy to find the dance hall. Lamps were blazing from every window, and the music was ringing as he rode up. A herd of saddle ponies, and a motley collection of buckboards, lumber wagons, and "white tops" were ranged along the fences. Everybody seemed to be out. The meeting house was full of happy celebrators.

Tying Chief securely to a fence, he made his way hesitantly toward the crowd. A feeling of bashfulness swept over him. He had stopped, half tempted not to push his way into the strange crowd, when some one slapped him on the shoulder, and a tipsy tongue said heartily:

"Hello, Tiddy, where the devil did ye drop from? No matter, you're here; good fer ye, lad, come on."

"Yes, Pat, I'm here; but I have half a notion not to face the music."

"The divil ye say! It's give in now, is it? Not while I've me money staked on ye. I'll have Jim show ye a foine time. It's just the crowd to suit ye. That Mormon beer they're passin' won't wet your throat, but ye'll like it, for there's no stick in it at all, at all; and they're a mighty social people, even if they do mix prayin' with their dancin'. Come along, me lad."

Thus urged, Fred soon found himself in the midst of the crowd.

"Here, Jamie," called Pat, as he caught sight of his partner in the doorway. Jim whirled around.

"I've caught this trout-lassoin' Tiddy," Pat went on; "now show him the toime of his life."

"Why, hello, Teddy," returned Jim, grabbing the boy's arm. "Come into the mix-up. You're losin' a deal."

Before Fred could protest, Jim had opened a way through the good-natured, jostling crowd of cowboys that blocked the doorway, and he found himself in the heart of the fun.

"Alleman left!" trumpeted Uncle Toby, through the buzz of voices, shrill music, and clattery feet. "Promenade all!" he called again. Then with a series of scraping flourishes he wound up his lively tune. The laughing, chatty couples, faces aflush, cleared the crowded floor.

"Your attention, please!" called the manager in a commanding tone.

The crowd quieted.

"The next on our program is a quartet by members of the choir, 'Sunset Land,' composed by David Willis for this occasion."

Four young people stepped out of the crowd to make their way to the head of the hall. The organist struck up a pleasing, though not very classic air, and they sang with spirit and harmony this song:

When our craggy hillsides freshen in the springtime,
When the canyons call for all that love to roam,
When the med' larks trill their love songs o'er the sage plains,
Then my heart turns to my rugged mountain home.

REFRAIN

'T is the West, the craggy West, that calls, that calls me;
'T is the sage and sego-lily land I love,
With its amber skies, its crystal streams, its mountains,
Where among the canyon wilds we rove, we rove.

Not your grassy, gentle Eastern hills can lure me,
Nor your sunny, Southern skies tempt 'way my heart,
Nor the waving green of sky-to-sky prairies,
Make me long from rugged Western scenes to part.
(Refrain)

Let me live fore'er among the mighty mountains,
Let me feel their splendid strength within my soul,
Let me wander 'neath their groves of whispering aspens,
Let me dream at last where mountain streamlets roll.
(Refrain)

The crowd applauded noisily till the quartet sang again the refrain, with the audience joining in heartily, if not always harmoniously:

'T is the West, the craggy West, that calls, that calls me;
'T is the sage and sego-lily land I love,
With its amber skies, its crystal streams, its mountains,
Where among the canyon wilds we rove, we rove.

"We'll now have a few words from one of our Pioneers, Brother Stephens," announced the manager.

A gray-haired veteran of about sixty rose and made his way to the platform.

"I'm glad to be here, young folks," he began; "but I don't like this preachin' business one

bit — never could git used to it. I've often said I'd ruther drive four yoke o' steers from Winter Quarters to the valleys than make a speech. But maybe I kin tell you a few things 'bout pioneerin' that'll interest you.

"I've pioneered it all my days. That's why I'm here. Come into this valley to git away from the crowds. From the look o' things here to-night, I'll soon hev to be movin' again. The way these valleys settle up is a caution.

"But you want to hear somethin' else. Well, I come in '47, not with the first band, but soon after. We had one hundred and thirty-four wagons in our company, all pulled by oxen, three or four yoke to the wagon. Every night we would make a corral of 'em — the wagons, I mean — by swingin' 'em in a circle with the tongues pintin' out — you see, leavin' two openin's so's we could drive the cattle in to yoke 'em. Fer we herded 'em out on the hills at night when there wa'n't any Injuns about, or when there wa'n't danger of buffaloes stampedin' the stock.

"Talkin' o' buffaloes, they was so thick they fairly swarmed. Down on the Platte one day we had to stop our train fer three hours to let 'em pass. They had the right o' way whenever they wanted it, I tell you. Nothin' could stop

'em when they got goin' on that steady lope of theirs. Kill 'em? Yes, all we wanted. Buffalo meat is mighty fine eatin'; I kin taste it yet. But then I guess our appetites wa'n't so pertickler then as they are nowadays.

"I guess that's enough talk fer to-night. You want to dance. I kin see you do. That's all right, too; I believe in lettin' folks have a good time as long as they have it right. Jest pitch in now and enjoy yourselves; but don't forget the Lord, even when you're havin' fun."

An outburst of hand clapping and some stamping of feet followed the speech. Even the rowdy cowboys got sport out of it; for they kept still to the end, then they set up a hearty laugh, as Dick Davis said smartly:

"Gee! I'm glad that old ox-puncher's quit. I'm getting nervous to dance again."

"Take your partners for a polka," called the floor manager.

The boys broke from their corners to make a rush across the floor for the girls.

"Hold on there!" shouted the manager. The crowd, more from surprise than respect, stopped short.

"Now, boys," he went on firmly but calmly, "no rowdyism! Have a good time, but have it decently."

"Huh!" sneered Dick, "he's gettin' fresh. Let's show him what a rough house means." His hand dropped to his hip to execute the thought he had suggested; but just then he caught the eyes of Alta Morgan. The look she gave stopped him from carrying out his purpose, but it did not check his smartness. Instead of sending a shot through the ceiling, he stepped up to her and said, "Come on, let's dance."

Alta hesitated a second before taking his arm; then, ignoring the offense, she accepted, and the next moment they were dancing gracefully to Uncle Toby's lively tune.

When the dance was announced, Jim drew Fred out of the corner where he had half hid himself during the speech, and took him across the room to a group of girls.

"Oh, don't, Jim," he half protested, "I'd rather not."

"Come now, no backing down," returned Jim; "Miss Willis, meet Mr. Benton."

A rosy-cheeked girl smilingly acknowledged the introduction, and Fred made bold to invite her to dance. They fell into the line of couples promenading around the room, and then the tune struck up. Fred found trouble at first to catch the steps, but very soon he caught them, and with them came the spirit of the fun. The

dance put him more at ease. Bowing his partner to her seat with thanks at the close, Fred turned to find Jim, and met Alta Morgan, her pretty face aglow to blend with the spray of wild roses on her dainty dress.

Both stopped in surprise.

"Why, it's Fred; I'm so glad to see you!"

"I'm happy to find you here, Miss Morgan," he responded, as they shook hands; "I felt rather strange."

"Oh, we'll soon make you at home." She turned to her partner, whom she had momentarily forgotten. "You know Mr. Davis, of course."

"Why, hello, Dick," said Fred, warmly; "I didn't see you."

"You got here, did you?" replied Dick, rather coolly; "we thought you'd took to the woods as usual."

"What!" said Alta, "why Fred's not like that one bit. He's the jolliest fellow I know. Let's make him acquainted with everybody." And Alta began to pass the introduction to those immediately about them. Dick, nettled at being thus suddenly dropped from first place in her attentions, made early opportunity to slip out of the group, and stalk to the crowd of cowboys around the door, while Alta went on

merrily to tell her friends how Fred had helped her land a trout and win a bet with her uncle.

The manager checked the fish story by announcing a waltz. A moment later Dick looked up to see Alta on Fred's arm, walking around the room. The sight stung his pride. To have Fred thus slip in between them, as the boys in their bantering had said he would, and to hear her speak to him with such a friendly air, was too much to stand calmly.

"How did they get so well acquainted?" was the thought that puzzled him.

He had not heard the fish talk or he might have guessed. He anticipated the fun that the other boys would have at his expense; for he had caught Jim taking in the situation gleefully. Yet despite the suddenness of the upset, Dick gathered himself quickly; and to show that he "didn't care a rap," marched smartly across the room to Sally Johnson and asked her to dance with him. Sally was only too glad of the chance. Then the music began. It was "The Roses Waltz," Uncle Toby's favorite tune, and he played it well.

Dick's efforts to create a sensation fell short of their mark. Alta and Fred had forgotten all else in the delight of the dance. They were gliding about the room with trippingly grace-

ful step to the pretty melody and enjoying each other.

"Why, you dance so easily!" said Alta, as the music ended.

"When I have a graceful partner," responded Fred. "That was too short. May I have another?" He felt his face flushing at his boldness.

"Yes, of course," returned Alta; "if I can give you pleasure, I'd like to, for it's my turn to pay up, you know."

"I'm afraid you'll leave me in debt," said Fred.

"Oh, you can soon pay it," said Alta, laughingly. "Just help me to land old Solomon next time."

"Good! You can do it too." Fred glowed with the anticipation of the fun. "Come any time and let me help you." Then he added modestly, "But I mustn't be selfish of your time to-night. Thank you ever so much for the dance."

"It was my pleasure, too," said Alta with a winsome smile. She turned to talk with the girls about her. As she did so, she caught a flash from Dick's eyes. He turned his head as their glances met; but she had read the meaning of the angry look, and it suddenly came to her that she had offended her partner.

Alta was ready to make amends, for she liked Dick and had no thought of hurting his feelings;

but he was in no mood to make up. He acted independently, flirted with the other girls all the evening. Alta was independent herself and she almost decided not to allow him to accompany her home, but she would not permit herself to pay such respect to his smartness, so she simply gave no further heed to his actions. This hurt him worst of all; and he had hard work to conceal his feelings as they rode away toward the ranch in the moonlight after the ball.

When the dance broke up, with its babble and chatter of hearty voices, rattling of rigs, and galloping hoof-beats, Fred found Chief nervous to be off. He mounted the high-spirited horse, and catching up with Pat and Jim, burst with them into a madcap chase across the flat toward home. A mile or so of this exciting sport and they slowed down to a canter, jollying one another over the night's doings.

"Bloomin' surprise party ye are, Tiddy," said Pat, "a regular step dancer."

"Yes," put in Jim, "and as full of spice about swingin' the girls as any of us."

"Oh, stop your nonsense," protested Fred.

"Faith," Pat broke in, "and didn't he dive into the bunch and cut Dick's ranch fairy out, though?"

"Roped and tied her before Dick caught his breath. Oh, he's a smooth cow-kid, I tell —"

The sentence was cut short by a wild whoop from a cowboy who dashed up just then, reined his puffing pony and called out,

"Hello, stags! travelin' or just goin' somewhere?"

"Stag yourself, you bloomin' spalpeen; and who are you to be salutin' yer betters so oncivilly?"

"Dick — I'll be hanged!" exclaimed Jim; "what's your hurry, sport? Did she shake you."

"Not on your life," retorted Dick; "I saw her home all right."

"Sounds fishy," said Jim; "you hain't had time."

"Time!" snapped Dick; "you pokes need spurs, that's all, especially this slick cow-kid in his borrowed outfit; here, take one of mine."

With the words Dick threw up his spurred heel and gave Chief a savage dig in the flank. The proud horse reared at the insult. Fred, caught unawares, was all but flung to the ground. He clutched the saddle horn in time to save himself from a serious fall, while the horse, with free head flung low, bucked and pitched madly along the road. The other riders followed close,

Dick laughing at his mischief, Jim shouting encouragement: "Stay with him, boy, stay with him!"

Luckily Chief did not whirl, but bucked straight ahead until his rider gradually drew up his head and quieted him.

The danger past, a violent temper seized Fred. He swung the horse about to face Dick, and with —

"Take that, you sneak!" he fetched his tormentor a stinging crack in the face with his quirt.

Dick jerked out his revolver and fired. Fortunately again for Fred, Chief had leaped as the quirt struck, and began to plunge again along the road. Dick was whirling to shoot again, when another pistol flashed in the moonlight and Jim shouted,

"Stop! you shoot again and I'll bore you." His tone meant business and Dick checked himself.

"What does this damned work mean, anyway?" demanded Jim as Fred came back, feverish with excitement.

"Mean," shouted Fred, "it means that this coward ripped my horse's flank with his spur."

"Did you do that, Dick?" again demanded the peacemaker.

"Yes, I did, and I'll do it again," was the sullen reply.

"Then you got about half of what you deserved. It was a low down trick. Now, don't you ever shoot again at an unarmed man, or I'll take a hand mighty quick."

"I'll teach the little devil a lesson that'll last him."

"Come on, you coward," challenged Fred angrily, ready to leap from his horse.

"Here, you young bulls," commanded Jim; "shut up and square up. You're even."

"Yis," put in Pat; "play the gintlemin, ye'll slape better."

"Now forget it!" said Jim more cheerily; "and don't do any bellerin' to-morrow, you understand."

"You mean that I shan't tell Dan how his horse has been treated?" said Fred. "Well, I guess I will."

"Oh, let it pass," said Jim.

"Oh, let the cow-baby beller," sneered Dick.

"That settles it," said Fred; "we'll see who's the cow-baby."

"Bully fer you, me boy," said Pat. "It's a thoroughbred ye are, fer sure."

"The kid's all right," said Jim encouragingly; "he stuck to that buckin' bronk like a tick.

He'll stick to anything. Come," he added, spurring up, "let's hit the trail; it's long after bunk time."

"Yis, and when ye tuck yourselves in the blankets, make sure ye say yer prayers twice," called Pat, as they struck a livelier pace. "Thank the Lord we're all gettin' home tonight without punctures in our hides."

A few moments later they had all tumbled into their beds in the old shack. But it was some time before either of the boys had worried through their troubled thoughts and fallen asleep. Dick kept nursing his bitterness against his companion into a real hate, and he seized every opportunity thereafter to express his mean feelings by ridiculing and injuring Fred in every way he could.

Chapter IX

AFTER THE BALL

THE sun found a sleepy crowd at breakfast next morning. The boys had life enough, however, to hector one another about the fun of the night before.

"It's hip, hooray for the Mormon lassies," chirruped Pat, as he banged about among his cooking utensils.

"And how about the Mormon beer, Chuck?" asked Dick.

"Dry, dry, dry," he sang dolefully, "dry as—"

"Their bloomin' prayers," put in Dick; "did you hear that long-faced old elder bawl to the Lord for blessings? I thought he'd never quit; but Teddy here took it like a saint. The kid's pious enough to show 'em the way to glory."

"Yes, and your smart talk shows your breeding," said Dan, rather sharply.

"My breeding's good as yours, Old Primrose."

"That may be," returned Dan calmly, "but one thing is certain, my breeding would make

me bite my tongue before I'd let it fling coarse jokes about prayer or anything else that's sacred." Dan's tone brought a strained silence. For a few seconds nothing was heard but the click of the knives and forks on the tin dishes. Then Pat came to the rescue with —

"Well, them Mormons are a jolly people anyway, if they do mix prayin' and preachin' with their dancin' and their eatin'. Faith, and I think it's a foine practice, especially that askin' the blessin' over their praties. It gives everybody a fair start. I've a moind to interjuce the custom in this bloomin' camp."

The Irishman's sally proved good sauce for breakfast. Everybody laughed, and things cleared up.

Dick did not take kindly, of course, the rap Dan had given him, but it saved him from the tormenting he had expected on a tenderer spot — his discomfiture over Alta. For even with all the bravado he could muster, he could not drive out of his brain the fact that his chances with her had received an upset. Their parting the night before had been too abrupt for comfort to him, or to Alta either.

For Alta did not enjoy quarrels. She had no well-defined feeling for Dick except to like him as a partner. He was quick at cowboy

repartee, and rather winning withal. Any of the other ranch girls would have taken delight in receiving his attentions. But Alta was out for fun, not fellows. As to falling desperately in love with him or any one else — well, she had no thought of such things at that time. Still Dick's dash and independence were a challenge to her own free spirit. He was as daring as she was saucy, and that made him provokingly interesting.

Her actions with Fred had nettled him. She felt it, but she did not know why. Dick did, however, and he found it hard work to throw off his ugly feeling and act decently. Not that he cared so much for Alta. It was the anticipation of jokes at his expense from the boys and the worse thought that for once he had met the girl who could ignore him, that angered him sorely.

As they had swung on at a lively gallop toward the Morgan ranch he turned his temperish feeling to smartness, making flippant remarks to draw out an expression of feeling from his partner. Alta, with quick wit, divined his thoughts, but she still kept her poise, foiling with lightsome yet ladylike deftness all his efforts to provoke a quarrel. Seeing that his efforts to annoy her failed to bring the response he desired, he finally desisted from making flippant

remarks and by the time they reached the ranch, "Richard was himself again."

"Thank you very much," said Alta, as he returned from taking care of her horse; "it has been a pleasant evening for me. I hope you have enjoyed it, too."

"Oh, sure, I had a dandy dance," said he lightly.

"Well, good night, happy dreams," she said, her eyes laughing in the moonlight.

Dick misread the glance and said boldly, "You are not going yet, are you?"

"Why not?" Alta's tone showed surprise; "it's late enough."

"Not till I get something sweet," he said smartly, as he grabbed her hands and bent to kiss her.

"Dick Davis! How dare you?" she exclaimed in startled, injured tone, as she jerked away and turned to the door.

Dick was nonplused, but he caught his astonished breath to say, "Oh, don't be scared! I won't hurt you; so long." Then swinging into his saddle he dug his spurs into his pony and dashed off, while Alta half ran into the house.

When she reached her room she stood by the window for a time, tapping her foot temperishly on the floor.

"The smarty!" she said, half aloud; "what does he take me for? I don't know why boys can't be happy and be gentlemen at the same time. I'm tired of their nonsense."

She began rather impetuously to disrobe. Then she stopped to watch the fleecy clouds glide calmly over the face of the moon. Again she turned to her couch and tucked herself among the comforts, where she lay tossing with her thoughts, and trying to nurse her indignant feelings against Dick into a real hate; but somehow she could not do it. Her heart was troubled. One thing only was clear: she must not tell her uncle a word about it. It would trouble him, too. Alta feared the consequences, if her uncle found out that Dick had mistreated her. No, she would keep such worries to herself. With this thought she fell asleep.

This again was a hard thing for Alta to decide. Except for her trouble with Bud she had always opened her heart freely to her foster father, for he was the only friend in whom she could confide. Indeed, he had been both father and mother to her for many years — ever since her own parents had passed away. She had lost her father when she was a babe in arms. Her mother too, a sweet, frail lily, whom Alta could just remember, had passed away some three years later.

Then Uncle Tom came into her life, back out of the rugged West, where he had gone after the war — came to lay his brother's wife tenderly away among the green hills of Ohio, and to take her baby girl to his own rugged heart. How she had softened and molded that old bachelor-soldier heart, how she had played upon it with a thousand childish whims, set it throbbing with anxiety, filled it with joy and love, we can but suggest here. Alta had grown to be part of Colonel Morgan's very life. For her sake he had tried to settle down again in Ohio, remaining there at his brother's home for nearly a year.

But the call of the craggy West came back in the springtime, and though it half broke his heart to do it, he yielded to his love of the strong life among the mountains, struck out across the plains again with full purpose to make a fortune in California and then return to take care of his "little squirrel" and bring her up in a life that befitted her.

Alta was left meanwhile with "Aunt Betty," a maiden sister of Colonel Morgan's mother, who had been nurse for the child since the young mother's death. It was a sore trial for both of them to see Uncle Tom leave. Every night, for months afterward, the child would cuddle

down in the motherly arms of Aunt Betty, to talk about her "dear daddy" 'way out West, express her fears that the wicked Indians would hurt him, and often cry herself to sleep. But Aunt Betty, though the silent tears at times trickled down her own withered cheeks, for this and other hidden sorrows, would cast aside the troubles cheerily and soothe and snuggle her "little squirrel" and sing her away to dreamland.

It was easier to keep cheery when Alta, a beribboned little maid of six, would trip away to the schoolhouse on a near-by hill. Bright and happy always, she learned her lessons in a flash and made friends of everybody. School days were to her a delight. They winged themselves away swiftly, carrying Alta into a beautiful girlhood, brimming with life, and pure and sweet as a rosebud.

Aunt Betty, gentle but firm, had watched and guided her unfolding throughout those tender years with almost more than a mother's care. They were companions in the highest sense. No thought of the child's but was freely shared with her foster mother; and this wise old lady, by tactful management and sweet suggestion, had cultivated in the child's heart such a sense of helpfulness, kindness, and virtue as had made her soul even more beautiful

than her face, if that were possible. Alta Morgan was a wholesome, serviceable, charming girl. Aunt Betty was a teacher of the heart and hands as well as of the head.

But changes came, as changes will. Colonel Morgan had not found the end of the rainbow as quickly as he had hoped, though he sought for it faithfully among the mines of California, Nevada, and finally of Idaho. Despairing at last of ever striking the lucky vein, he turned to other fields, and eventually settled to the thought of ranching. Such a life was at least less uncertain of returns and would afford the quiet his age was beginning to demand. This decision made, he bought a well-stocked ranch, added to his acres by taking up more, and was just getting things into comfortable shape, when a message from Alta, with whom, of course, he had kept in close touch all of these years, brought the startling news that Aunt Betty had been taken away. "God has called her from me," the tender words ran; "won't daddy hurry home to his broken-hearted little girl?"

An hour later Colonel Morgan was driving posthaste to the station, sixty miles away. A few days later he stepped from the train at his old home town in Ohio. As he swung the gate and hurried toward the house, a beautiful

girl ran down the path to fling her arms about his neck and kiss his rugged face again and again. Then they walked slowly to the little cottage, sat in Aunt Betty's old armchair on the porch, and clung to each other while they sobbed out their sorrow in the twilight together.

"Oh, daddy, dear, take me away, take me away. This will never be home again with my Aunt Betty gone. Take me, daddy, take me," cried the anguish-stricken girl.

"There, 'little squirrel,' don't cry; I will take you and keep you by me always. Oh, how I've missed you these long years!"

And that was how Alta Morgan came to the mountains — the pride of her old uncle's heart, and to become the pride of the valley.

Her memories of Aunt Betty remained with her as a sweet, pure atmosphere throughout her life; but in the thrilling newness of the life of the craggy West her heart soon forgot its troubles. She responded to the life about her so readily that she seemed to have been always a part of it — a true Western girl, spontaneous, open-hearted, alive, free, yet tender and gentle withal. She was a sweet, wild rose blooming among the briers.

"Mornin', daddy!"

"Good morning, little chipmunk!" responded Colonel Morgan, as Alta peeped playfully

through the door rather too late for breakfast. "How's my bright-eyed lassie after her fun?"

She tripped across the room, to give him a squeeze and a kiss.

"Oh! I'm happy. How are you?"

"Gaunt as a race horse," he returned, heaving a hungry sigh; "Aunt 'Liza went off celebratin' too, you know, and she hasn't got back yet." Aunt 'Liza was the housekeeper of the ranch.

"What!" exclaimed Alta, "then you haven't had breakfast? Why didn't you wake this sleepy-head girl of yours? I'll hurry now for sure." She skipped to the kitchen as she spoke, to find breakfast well under way.

"You dear old daddy," she called, tripping back to give him another kiss; "I am afraid you are going to spoil me. There's nothing left to do but set the table. But why didn't you wake me?"

"Oh, I knew my little girl would be tired after such a jolly time with her new beau."

Alta winced. What if her uncle had heard it? She hesitated, then replied a little confusedly, "Oh, yes, the dance was fine; they're real social folks."

"And how's the new beau, honey?" persisted her uncle in a teasing tone.

Alta blushed, then said evasively, "He's all right, I suppose."

Colonel Morgan, seeing her embarrassment, leaped to the thought that she hesitated to talk because she was in love with Dick. She had never held back before. The thought pained him, but tenderness for her feelings checked him from pressing the point further. "Well, never mind," he said gently; "I like Dick, too."

"But I don't!" the words leaped to Alta's lips; she bit them back, however, hurried again to the kitchen to regain her poise, and a few moments later came back singing:

'T is the West, the craggy West, that calls, that calls me;
'T is the sage and sego-lily land I love,
With its amber skies, its crystal streams, its mountains,
Where among the canyon wilds we rove, we rove.

"Hello!" said her uncle; "where did that new song come from?"

"Oh, they sang it last night at the party. Like it?"

"Sounds pretty; sing some more."

"I don't know it yet; but I'll get Mary to teach it to me and then I'll sing it all for you. It's a real Western song."

"Do, little one, I'd like to hear it," the old colonel replied. Then he lapsed for a while into quiet thought. The strain had waked the echoes in his heart.

Chapter X

COMPANIONSHIP

IF food and clothes and kindness were all that is needed in this old world, Alta Morgan had all she needed. But there is one vital need that these comforts, good as they are, cannot fill, and that is true companionship. Her uncle gave her fatherly love and protection, but his thoughts were forever with his fine stock and broad hayfields, or in the memories of the stirring days gone by — the war and the wild West.

Aunt 'Liza, the housekeeper, was a good-natured, bread-and-butter sort of woman, who could stand up under a ton of such work as washing and cooking. She could set hearty meals and keep the ranch house clean and tidy; but her conversation was limited, for the most part, to "Land sakes!" and "Law me!" Her thoughts seldom went beyond the "vittles." Alta's heart hungered for higher things.

If she could have found a girl to chum with, one of like tastes with her, she might have been

satisfied; but she could not. Sally was jolly enough, big-hearted and wholesome, but she lacked refinement. She could work like a steam engine all day, singing her way through great stacks of clothes to be washed, or big meals for hungry haymakers. She was a helpful, hearty, romping ranch girl, just the kind that Aunt 'Liza liked. And she was also a great favorite with the fellows, with whom she would dance till morning, but whose ears she would box as quick as lightning if they grew too smart. She could joke with the whole crowd of them and hold her own, but the girl was as pure as she was frank and free. A stranger might have taken her seeming boldness for rudeness or worse, but let him make the slightest step toward evil, he would be checked like a flash and forfeit forever her heart's hospitality.

Alta liked Sally, but they could never be chums. They both were playful and pure, but there was one strikingly essential difference in their natures that held them apart. Sally's joys were found almost entirely in sensuous pleasures, such as dancing and feasting and riding the range; a good mince pie was more satisfying to her than a mountain sunset. She cared little for books and music. Alta thought her over bold with the boys. Their natures could never blend.

Mary was nearer to Alta's inner nature, a gentle little lass, who clung closely to her mother. She was too shy and dainty for the rugged ranch life. Alta wanted some one who liked the out-of-doors. Mary preferred to sit at home doing fancy work. They couldn't find their fun together; and after all, fun and friendship are largely one and the same thing.

Alta Morgan's early life had cultivated in her a taste for something better than picnics and dances and beaux. She enjoyed such pleasures, but she found a richer enjoyment in books and in nature. The warblers that twittered and trilled their morning lays out of the breezy willows, the flush of crimson in the dawning sky, the mighty mountains in their many mystic moods — all gave to her soul such feelings as often brought tears. Her heart's eyes were always open to the wonders of the world about her. And she found them everywhere, from the tender pale-blue flaxflower at her feet to the proud eagle, sailing with the winds in the clear blue above her.

Life was joyous, full of riches, to this responsive, natural girl, developing day by day into queenly womanhood. Every day brought her new and interesting experiences that set her chattering with expressions of delight and

appreciation. In these moods she would run home at first to Aunt 'Liza; but she got only "Law me! child, that's nuthin'," so often that she gradually grew discouraged and closed her inmost heart to the practical-minded old lady.

Her uncle tried to respond to her delight over the beautiful flower, or butterfly, or bird's eggs she would bring to him; but somehow he couldn't make his old bachelor's heart be a child's again, and Alta instinctively felt that he thought of it all as foolishness. Sally made fun of her for "talking so silly about the sunsets." She found no comfort among these friends. Her heart grew lonely. She was longing for true companionship, for some one who could understand and share her delight in things really delightful, when Fred came into her life.

He loved the things she loved. That was their bond of sympathy. His heart's eyes were open, too, to the glories of the wonder-world; and he, too, had found the "open sesame" to another world — the world ideal hidden in the covers of great books.

Bashful, boyish, unused to the company of girls, he had found it hard to meet Alta half way and enjoy life's riches the more by sharing them. But this innocence and native modesty was the very thing that made possible the sweet com-

panionship that gradually grew between them. Alta had no serious thoughts of love at that time; no more had Fred; yet something strangely sweet was in their friendship. They loved to be together. She was so natural, so full of sweet surprises that she charmed and held him. His eyes were bright with intelligence, his heart pure and warm. She trusted him instinctively; she found in him a kindred spirit. She looked through his eyes upon the world about her, and her heart leaped to feel that there was some one else who enjoyed in like measure the things that thrilled her.

So it happened that she often sought him. So it happened that they grew to be as brother and sister romping hand in hand together over nature's playground, this wild western valley in its native glory, before commercialism had stretched its barbed fences across the trails and laid out its artificial roads for men to follow, driving with discordant noises the wild life away forever.

"Law me!" exclaimed Aunt 'Liza the next morning during breakfast, "I wish I had some gooseberries or cherries to make a pie. I'm gettin' tired of beef and taters and rice puddin'."

"Will currants do?" asked Alta.

"Currants! Law, yes; any kind o' fruit 'll do; but a body can't git nuthin' like that in this

country. It makes me homesick for old Pottawattamie County back in Ioway, where there's tons o' fruit fer the pickin'."

"Yes, but there are plenty of wild currants here too," Alta responded, "up along the creek. I found a fine patch there the other day."

"Land sakes! why didn't you fetch some home?"

"I had no way to carry them; but if you like I'll get some to-day."

"Yes, and git out o' helpin' wash! But never mind, I'll excuse you if you'll bring in somethin' good to eat. Jest wash up these dishes while I set the clothes to movin' and you kin go."

Her work quickly cleared, Alta was on Eagle a few moments later, galloping briskly toward the creek. Up near the old ford the currant bushes were thick; and this year they were bending with their juicy brown fruit.

It was near where Fred grazed his herd. She came upon him this morning chasing two unruly heifers out of the brush.

"Good morning," he called cheerfully; "what brings you here to-day?"

"Oh, I'm fishing again," she responded laughingly; "fishing for berries this time." She raised her pail as she spoke.

"Poor place to get berries. They are thicker across the creek. I found a patch of the best wild strawberries there that I ever tasted."

"Strawberries!" exclaimed Alta, "why, they don't grow here, do they? I said berries, but I meant currants."

"Come along and I'll prove it," he replied, "it's just a little way."

They galloped across the creek, Fred leading till they came to a place where the stream made a graceful bend among the aspens, and there in an opening of the grove about ten rods square was the wild berry patch.

Leaping from his horse, he found some of the berries, small but sweet and juicy, and handed them up to his companion, saying,

"There, will you believe it now?"

"Oh, this is fine!" she responded, jumping from Eagle's back. "And Aunt 'Liza said that this was a fruitless country. I'll give her a big surprise."

"Good, let me help you!" And they worked away like happy children among the berries. "There are other kinds of fruit in these mountains, too," he went on. "Uncle Dave showed me huckleberries and raspberries and chokecherries the other day, but they're not ready yet."

"Uncle Dave? Who's he?" asked Alta.

"The old mountaineer that I told you about the day you caught the fish."

"Yes, and you did not keep your promise to take me up to see him."

"Well, I'll certainly keep it whenever you are ready. How would you like to take a ride Saturday with me after chickens?"

"Let's do it," she responded, "next Saturday — Good! Where shall I come?"

"Meet me here about four o'clock."

"All right. Now I must be getting home or Aunt 'Liza will scold."

"But you haven't your currants," suggested Fred.

"I declare I'd forgotten them! I should get a scolding for sure if I didn't get some for her pie. But I can soon fill the pail."

"With me to help," said Fred; "let's go to the patch across the creek where they're thick."

In a few moments they were among the currant brush, chatting merrily as they worked away. The pail was soon filled with golden-brown currants. Fred placed the lid on securely and helped Alta mount her pony.

"Oh, thank you ever so much," she said, as she turned to ride away.

"It is fun to help you," he responded; "come again."

"Four o'clock next Saturday; I'll remember," she called back.

Another pair of eager ears caught her parting words, too. Dick, returning from a fruitless quest after the work horses that morning, had come upon the two unawares. Seeing that they had not noticed him, he slipped back into the grove, where for the last few moments he had sat on his horse, eyes and ears alive to catch what was going on. But nothing significant came till he heard this good-by sentence.

It made him furiously jealous, but he held down his feelings until Alta had disappeared; then, breaking from the brush, he rode up to Fred with his usual bravado and said sneeringly,

"Hello, cow-baby! Tendin' to business well to-day?"

With this cutting remark, he struck spurs to his horse and dashed away over the flat, leaving Fred too astonished to reply. He hurried to gather up his scattered herd, and found one of his fattest heifers missing. All the afternoon he searched for her, but night came and the animal was still gone. The boy was sorely worried.

After supper, he called Dan aside and told him about the loss, saying in conclusion, "It was my

fault. I shouldn't have left the herd so long; but if I don't find the heifer, I'll pay for it."

"You must keep a sharper eye on them these days," replied Dan. "The flies drive 'em crazy. But don't worry, boy, she'll turn up all right to-morrow."

Dan's hopeful prophecy, however, did not come true. The animal never did turn up. Fred's real troubles had begun.

Chapter XI

MOUNTAIN FUN

"AREN'T these mountain pictures wonderful?" exclaimed Fred, as Alta galloped up to meet him on Saturday afternoon. "I just marvel at them."

"They certainly are pictures," she responded, "pictures of many moods, always changing, yet always interesting; I never get tired looking at them."

"Do you know what the mountains always are to me?" he asked.

"No; what?"

"A challenge to climb. I'd like to scale those craggy old peaks yonder and look out over the world."

"So should I," she responded; "but I'd enjoy more roaming among those green foothills. They remind me so much of the wooded hills near my old Ohio home."

"That's where Uncle Dave lives," said Fred.

"Oh, I'm wild to see him and his cosy cabin!" she exclaimed.

They galloped away along the road over the old ford.

"Let's take the trail close to the creek," he suggested; "perhaps we shall scare up some chickens. I hate the old sage brush trail anyway."

"Hate the sagebrush!" exclaimed Alta. "Why that's one of the most interesting things in this wild West. It makes a fine shaggy blanket for this craggy country; and its purple gray color blends wonderfully with the surroundings."

"That may be true enough," replied Fred, "judging from an artist's viewpoint; but it isn't so pleasant to ride through."

"Oh, look! look!" cried Alta, changing the subject quickly.

Fred glanced up to see four antelope bounding across the flat not a hundred yards away — a pair of grown ones with their fawns.

Brownie, ever alert to surprises, needed no second touch before she was bounding after them. A mad chase of a few hundred yards and then the unexpected happened. The fawns stopped short, to whirl and gaze on their pursuer, while the old ones, never checking their speed, kept bounding away to safety. Out of rifle reach, they too turned to watch results.

Fred headed his mare straight toward the fawns; he had almost reached them when they

sprang away again, but instead of following their anxious parents, they began to run in a circle about Alta. It was a thrilling sight for her to watch Fred make his wild chase after the bounding balls of tan and white. The fawns, springing on slender legs, kept easily out of reach. Seeing that he could not catch them, Fred stopped and raised his shotgun, but he dropped it quickly, without firing, and returned to his companion. The beautiful little creatures, finding themselves unpursued, soon stopped again to turn and gaze curiously. As they did so, their mother's plaintive bleat must have struck their sensitive ears, for they suddenly whirled and leaped away toward her to safety.

"Oh, I'm so glad you didn't shoot them!" said Alta. "Aren't they charming little things? I never saw one before."

"Some people say that they will lie down if one chases them," said Fred. "Perhaps they will, if one chases them long enough, but these are too old to give up quickly. I wish I could have caught one for you. I didn't mean to harm them. Just see them following the white beacons over that hill."

"Oh, isn't it fun!" exclaimed Alta, as they struck out again up the hills toward the old mountaineer's cabin.

"I'm just a little puzzled to know how to bring things about," said Fred.

"What things?"

"Why, your meeting with the old trapper. Say, Alta, I'll tell you."

"Yes?"

"Let's skirmish up this creek for chickens. We may scare up some grouse. If Uncle Dave hears us shooting, he may come out and meet us."

"Very well," responded the girl.

They had not gone far till there was a rustling in the brush, and a bevy of grouse scurried through the open space into the grove before them.

"There's your chance," said Fred, loading his gun; "slip off now and try your luck."

Alta jumped to the ground in a flutter of excitement.

"Keep cool now," cautioned her companion, as he passed her the weapon and grasped her horse's rein. "They won't run far."

She stepped ahead a few yards, and sighting one of the birds through the brush, raised the gun rather uncertainly and fired. A whir of wings followed the report.

"Oh, I knew I'd miss it!" she cried, handing back the gun.

"But you didn't miss," said Fred, running into the grove and lifting up the prize.

Alta clapped her hands and began to dance with delight; but she stopped in her expressions of glee when she took the dead bird in her hands, and began to smooth its torn, blood-stained feathers.

"It's a shame to kill these beautiful creatures," she said, soberly; "but there's a thrill about it. I didn't think I could hit anything."

"I wonder if I can scare up the flock again," said Fred. "Will you stay here while I try?"

"Certainly!" said Alta, taking the reins of both horses, while he disappeared through the grove.

She stood quietly watching him go, her arm thrown carelessly over Eagle's lowered head, her hair fanned by the gentle breeze, eyes bright with the excitement.

The old mountaineer paused in wonder as he came upon her. His bearded lips were parted slightly, his eyes widened with astonishment. He hesitated, then thinking he might slip away unnoticed, was about to go, when she turned her head and saw him.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, in a half-startled tone.

"How do you do, Miss?" he said gently; "don't be frightened. It's just accident that I happened on you this way. What brings you to these parts?"

"Why,— we were just hunting chickens," she returned, still a little nervous.

"I see, I see," he spoke calmly. "'Air ye from down the valley?"

"Yes, I live at Morgan's ranch."

Two shots from Fred's gun broke in.

"Your partner seems to be gettin' 'em," said Uncle Dave. "I hope he won't kill the mother bird. The young uns need her a spell yet to teach 'em more sense. Hev ye been in this valley long?"

"Just a few years," replied Alta, more at ease. "My uncle brought me here from Ohio."

"Ohio!" the old man's face kindled with new interest. "Why, I come from the Buckeye country, too."

"Did you really?" said Alta, alive with the thought; "what part?"

"Licking County."

"Why, that's not far from our old home. How interesting! Have you lived here many years?"

Before the old mountaineer could make reply, Fred broke out of the brush holding up the two birds he had killed. He stopped in astonishment as he caught sight of his friends, then he said warmly,

"How do you do, Uncle Dave?"

"Oh, it's you, boy. Glad to see ye."

"This is Miss Morgan. I brought her up to get a treat of chickens."

"Well, ye seem to hev got 'em, boy. Them's fine fries, tender enough fer any taste. It's all right as long's you don't kill the mother bird. And don't you shoot my biddies up by the spring. There's a late brood there — hatched this month — that I'm watchin'. The old hen brings 'em up to the cabin to see me every mornin' and to get the scraps I save fer 'em."

Alta was all interest. "You surely don't mean wild chickens, do you?"

"Wal, they ain't exactly wild; but they were pretty nervous till I tamed 'em."

"How did you do it?"

"Kindness, girl, kindness. Most wild creatures wouldn't be wild if their enemies didn't make 'em so. And man is the worst enemy they hev — white man. He's never satisfied unless he's killin'."

Fred winced. "You're not scolding me, Uncle Dave?"

"No, boy, of course not; I didn't mean anybody in perticler. There's no harm in killin' a few chickens when they're needed. It's this killin' jest fer the excitement of killin' that riles me. But come up to the cabin and rest a spell. This girl's tired, and I want to hear some

more about the old Buckeye country. Maybe she'd like some huckleberries to eat. I was jest pickin' some when I heard you shoot. There's a heap of them in this brush now."

"Oh, isn't this a picture!" exclaimed Alta, as they came to the brow of the hill that looked down upon the cabin. "You have chosen a delightful place to live in, Uncle Dave — I beg pardon — I —" she checked herself.

"No pardon needed, Miss, that's the name I like best. Jest use it." The remark put Alta completely at her ease. She, too, made him feel completely at home with her. He was rather uncomfortable around women. All his life he had avoided them; but Alta was so spontaneous, so natural, that the old mountaineer forgot any embarrassment he might have otherwise felt in her presence. They chatted on as if they were old acquaintances.

"What jolly mountain fun we've had to-day!" exclaimed the happy girl, as they struck the trail toward home, after a pleasant hour at Uncle Dave's cabin, enjoying mountaineer memories and a feast of huckleberries. "Why, he's just a natural old man! I like him."

"Yes, and he likes you, too; that's what makes me happy. But then, I knew he would."

"Thanks," said Alta, laughingly.

"For what?"

"For the compliment you just paid me."

"Why, I didn't —"

"Didn't mean it?" returned she playfully. "Then I'll take back my thanks."

They had come to the forks of the trail. For a moment before parting they sat there in the twilight talking. As they did so, Fred glanced up to see some shadowy forms on horseback stealing through an opening in the grove of trees just to the eastward.

"What's that?" he whispered.

She looked in the direction he was pointing.

"Isn't it a band of Indians?" she asked.

"But why are they skulking about here, I wonder? It looks like mischief to me. Come, Alta, I'm going to see you safely home."

"Very well."

They turned their horses toward the Morgan ranch and galloped off.

"Thank you so much, Fred, for this happy day. Good night," she said, as she passed through the gate he had opened for her.

"Good night," he said, watching her gallop away. Then closing the gate, he leaped on Brownie, took another trail, and rode slowly homeward, with a strange new feeling in his heart.

Chapter XII

AMONG THE TEPEES

THE scene is a horseshoe cove, or basin, half a mile or more in average width, situated high up the mountain slopes. A rim of ragged rock hides and walls it away from the banks of hills and the peaks about it. A score of laughing streams, born of snow-fed springs, running generally toward the lower northwest end, combine there to make a strong stream which plunges into a craggy gorge and foams through it into the wider canyon below.

This gorge, the only break in the wall of the basin, is at the same time the only gateway into it. A risky way it offers to those who would enter the mighty mountain horseshoe. Yet a trail there is leading into this hole in the wall, fit only for the mountain sheep; and along this risky way Old Copperhead had led his band, and within this cliff-barricaded dell they had pitched their smoky-topped tepees.

For it was a dell, a glorious one too, with its patches of dark pines climbing the hillside slopes

and scaling the painted cliffs, its groves of bright quaking aspens, its meadows of mountain grass, knee-deep, out of whose tasseled green, fringed daisies, pink geraniums, bluebells, waxy columbines, and a hundred other kinds of wild flowers shone in starry profusion.

An artist's heart would have leaped to see the picture that night when the sun, slowly wheeling down the west, flooded the dell with light, tinting with gold and pink and purple the cliffs and sleepy clouds that lingered and smiled brightly out of the clear blue above.

The tawny-topped wigwams pitched carelessly about among the open groves, the dusky savages variously grouped about the fires, the contented vari-colored ponies feasting on the fragrant meadows — all together made such a picture as might thrill the soul of a master.

But it was not the charms of the scene that had drawn Old Copperhead into this delightful cove. The place just now offered another more vital attraction for him and his band — safety from pursuit. It gave them a surer base of operations in the new business that they, under the lead of Bud Nixon, had begun. It was a perfect robber's roost for the cattle-thieving outlaws. From this vantage place, by climbing to a certain point they could com-

mand a full view of the valley below. Should they be pursued, the gorge offered a fine chance to ambush the enemy and beat him back.

With luxuriant grass in plenty and the purest of water, with berries in abundance, with trout enough to feed many multitudes, and with elk, deer, and other big game all around them, there was no need for man or beast to go hungry. There was little excuse, indeed, for the cattle-stealing and other mischief they had begun.

This part of the program, however, fathered in the spirit of revenge by Nixon, grew and thrived on the spirit of dare-deviltry in the Indians. It was native sport for them to steal out into the valley and lift the fat steer or heifer from right under the ranchers' noses, drive the beast into the brush and kill it, then slip back with the meat, unobserved, much less caught. How they would chuckle over their exploits at night around the wigwam fires as they told with much bragging about their daring fun.

Nixon fattened on the success his thick-headed smartness was bringing him. The Indians were growing to look upon Ankanamp as a "heap big chief." Old Copperhead had some cause to be a little jealous of the white man's waxing popularity; but he was too crafty to let such a feeling show, if he had it. Bud was a good tool to

work out the Redskin's revenge against the whites. If the tool got too sharp, it would not be hard to do away with it some dark night.

Just now, however, the old chief nursed no such thoughts. Instead, he was fostering a scheme to make his white ally a full-fledged member of the tribe by making him a squaw man. This suggestion had come, no doubt, to the watchful old chief from seeing Bud flirt with the young squaws. These dusky damsels received his sallies at first very shyly; but by degrees some of the bolder ones began to respond and chatter back in "Injun talk" when he joked with them. Bud was a socially inclined fellow. He mixed readily, and he was always girl-struck. It made little difference what the color or looks, so long as it was a girl. That he was white naturally made the young squaws more responsive to Ankanamp. He had his choice among them, but his favors were soon turned to Laughing Eyes, one of the brightest of the band, and a sister of Flying Arrow.

Of course with Bud the Indian love business was but lightly thought of. It was just a temptation thrown his way; and he didn't resist temptation. He yielded to everything that promised satisfaction for the time being, caring no whit for the consequences. Never

mind the morrow; the night is here; and night is for sport — even among the Indians.

The wigwam fires were blazing merrily. Around them the squaws, young and old, were bustling about, carrying wood, cutting meat, mixing dough, and getting pots and pans ready to cook the feast for their hungry bucks, who had just come whooping into camp with their spoils, and had thrown themselves upon the blankets about the littered tepees to rest.

An air of unusual jollity accompanied the meal getting. They were to celebrate with a dance that night. The squaws chattered like magpies as they hurried up the meal. The papooses, catching the spirit, made themselves more numerous and mischievous than ever, for which privilege they frequently were sharply slapped. Even the dogs caught a whiff of the fun. One ragged cur, infected with the impish spirit, dared to snatch a choice bit of beef — an unpardonable crime for a dog, for which he was fetched a savage thump by an old squaw. The yelp of pain he gave woke the echoes; the dog dropped meat and tail and struck off for the woods, followed by a bunch of howling papooses, who pelted him with sticks and stones.

Then the feast was spread Indian fashion, about the various lodges, served to the bucks

first, who speared into the kettle with their hunting knives for pieces of meat. "Flapjacks" and coffee well sugared made up the rest of the feast. This was the common fare. Old Copperhead and the White Chief were given a somewhat choicer diet. They sat apart near their tepees. The best cuts of meat were served to them; and they had mountain trout. A dish of wild raspberries, too, was brought to Ankanamp by Laughing Eyes. He winked at her and smiled.

This was enough — a rich reward for her struggle through the thorny brush and up the shelving rocks to get the dainty fruit. Her heart laughed to feel that her White Chief was pleased.

This had been her reward, too, when a few days before she had laid before him a beautifully beaded pair of moccasins and a fringed and beaded buckskin shirt which she and his foster mother, Old Towano's squaw, had made. Bud was really proud of that gift.

After the feast came the dance. Decked in their gaudiest feathers and fringes, the young bucks and squaws came from their tepees to the chosen spot, a level, grassy plat near the middle of the camp. At a signal, they formed in a circle and began their jigging, rhythmic movements to the tune of the tom-tom. Pyrotechnic

yells occasionally broke the monotony of the music. Bud did not join in the fun till some of the bolder young squaws grabbed and hustled him into the laughing group of dancers. Once started, he set the pace for the natives, much to their howling delight.

The fun waxed warmer. The dancers began to leap and scream like dervishes. It became a midnight revel of the Redskins. Bounding and yelling and flourishing their arms, the savages looked like dancing demons — a wild, weird picture in the light of the August moon. The fun was flying fast and furious when a sharp warning signal from Old Copperhead checked every lip and limb dead still. Another signal and they broke from the circle to scatter into their wigwams. A few moments more and every human sound was hushed. Only the sighing of the pine trees and the gurgling music of the streams blended to break the solemn stillness of the night.

But when all was quiet, two forms slipped out from beneath two different tepees and stole through the silent camp to meet each other in the shadow of the pines. It was Laughing Eyes and Ankanamp. A whispered word during the dance had brought them together at this trysting place.

The Indian girl approached her burly lover shyly, half fearfully, and when he grabbed her hands, she shrank at their touch, drawing back with sudden impulse to turn and flee. But Bud pulled her close to him, and her love-filled heart held her there, instinctively resenting his rough caresses, yet yielding, slipping toward him as he poured his love flattery into her eager ears.

"You say you want me?" she echoed him.

"Sure!"

"What you want me for?"

"I heap like you."

"You no love me"; she jerked from him and turned to run away, but he grabbed her.

"Oh, hold on, little one, don't be so pertickler; sure I love you."

"You want-a make me your squaw?"

"Yes, squaw, anything you like. I'll fix it all right. Come on; you heap perty." He threw his arm about her and kissed her glowing face upturned to his in the moonlight.

"Me love you, me heap love White Chief," she responded.

A cloud glided over the face of the moon, making the gloom of the pines deeper. Some time later the moon shone out again, lighting the way of the lovers, stealing back to their tepees. They had almost reached their respective lodges

and Bud was chuckling to himself over the success of his scheme, when he caught sight of a tall brave standing by a wigwam watching them. Flying Arrow had risen to make sure that all was well in camp. Bud gave him a sneaking look as he passed, and caught the angry flash in the young chief's eyes. Not a word was said, but Ankanamp felt that the Indian instinctively knew what had happened, and a withering fear struck his heart. He threw it aside, however, and rolled himself up in his blanket to drop into a heavy sleep.

With the trustful Indian maiden, however, there was neither sleep nor peace. The maddening joy of requited love was battling in her soul with anxiety and fear all through the long still night. When morning broke it brought with it a strange new world for her.

Chapter XIII

AT SHADOW POOL

A DAY or two after this Fred was up early and heading his cattle toward the good grass along Sage Creek. For several hours he watched them grazing among the willows; then as they began to quiet and lie down, he felt safe to leave them, while he kept tryst with Alta.

She had not come when he reached Shadow Pool, so flinging himself on the grassy bank under the trees, he pulled out of his pocket a small volume and was soon lost in its pages.

"Good morning," came a cheery voice to break into his reverie, as Alta, bursting through the brush, reined Eagle suddenly on the gravel. Fred jumped up to greet her.

"What's the tale that charms you so?" she said, slipping from her horse.

"Just an Injun story," he returned, reaching out the book.

"Hiawatha," she read; "What's it about?"

"I hardly know; it seems to be a number of old Indian tales the poet has woven together

about some big chief. The story is strange, but I rather like it."

"Read some to me," she requested.

"I'd rather hear you read," he half objected.

"That's not fair; you know the story. Won't you, please? I'm hungry to hear something good."

"Yes," he responded, "if you really wish it."

They sat down on the grassy bank together and he began by telling her briefly the beginnings of the poem, the stories of the peace pipe and the four winds.

"This myth of the morning star and the east wind is rather charming, I think," and he read with appreciative feeling these lines:

Young and beautiful was Wabun,
He it was who brought the morning,
He it was whose silver arrows
Chased the dark o'er hill and valley,
He it was whose cheeks were painted
With the brightest streaks of crimson,
And whose voice awoke the village,
Called the deer and called the hunter.
Lonely in the sky was Wabun,
Though the birds sang gayly to him,
Though the flowers of the meadow
Filled the air with fragrance for him,
Yet his heart was sad within him,
For he was alone in heaven.
But one morning gazing earthward
While the village still was sleeping,
And the fog lay on the river

Like the ghost that goes at sunrise,
He beheld a maiden walking
All alone upon the meadow,
Gathering water flags and rushes
By the river in the meadow.
Every morning gazing earthward
Still the first thing he beheld there
Was her blue eyes looking at him,
Two blue lakes among the rushes.
And he loved this lonely maiden,
Who thus waited for his coming;
For they both were solitary,
She on earth and he in heaven.
And he wooed her with caresses,
Wooed her with his smiles of sunshine,
With his flattering words he wooed her,
Gentlest whispers in the branches,
Softest music, sweetest odors,
Till he drew her to his bosom,
Folded in his robes of crimson,
Till into a star he changed her,
Trembling still upon his bosom;
And forever in the heavens
They are seen together walking,
Wabun and the Wabun-Annung,
Wabun and the star of morning.

Alta sat silent a moment as he finished — then, "What a beautiful myth!" she said. "I wonder if the Indians really did tell such tales?"

Her companion did not reply. He was listening to something else.

"I'm afraid something's wrong with my cattle," he said, handing her the book and jumping to his feet. "Just wait here a few moments till I chase out and see what's up."

"Certainly," said Alta, continuing silently to read, as, leaping on Brownie, he dashed out toward the flat.

Intent on the developing poem, Alta was oblivious to the fact that she was being watched by a pair of wicked eyes that peered through the willows only a few steps away. These same eyes, indeed, had been watching with jealous flash the scene we have just pictured.

Had it been Dick Davis instead of Fred whom Bud Nixon had found with Alta that morning, there is no telling the result; for he was still hot with hate. As it was, he had hard work to hold down his impulse to kill.

Out with his bunch of Indian thieves, he had caught sight of Alta as she was galloping into the brush along the trail to meet Fred. Seized with a passion to follow and torment her — or do worse, the White Injun, ordering his band to wait in the cover of the trees, dashed after the unsuspecting girl. Guessing her purpose to fish, for he had sighted her rod, he made sure to catch her off her horse and unprotected along the creek.

Hiding and tying his pony in the brush, he stole along the trail Alta had taken till his ear caught the sound of voices. He hesitated an instant, then with smothered rage in his heart,

he crept inch by inch under the willows till he caught sight of the two friends.

Any but ugly eyes would have found the picture beautiful. On the bank of velvety green they sat, their faces animated with the poet pictures they were sharing. The aspens cast cooling shadows over them, while the stream sang its soothing song as it rippled over the pebbles into Shadow Pool.

But Bud found no beauty in the scene. Fighting mad to be robbed of his chance to do deviltry, his one thought was to get the boy out of his way. Once his hand went to his revolver, but he checked it. Another plan came to his thick brain. He would set his bucks upon the boy's herd and draw him away. It was a silly, serious trick, but he stole back to execute it. And the plan worked. Fred, hearing the bellowing cows, hurried to find the cause of trouble, while Nixon, coming back through the brush, stepped out of it suddenly before Alta.

With an exclamation of fright she jumped up, half-dazed with the sight of a man decked in gaudy Indian trappings standing before her. It was as if the Indian she was reading about had suddenly jumped into reality before her very eyes. Her impulse was to scream, but she held it, to demand —

"Who are you?"

"You don't know me, Miss Alta?" he leered.

"Know you!"— she scanned him more closely —"yes, I do. Why do you spring at me in this way, Bud Nixon?"

"Oh, don't get mad, little gal; that ain't the way to treat old friends. Come, meet me decent." He grabbed at her as he spoke and tried to kiss her.

"Stand back, you insulting devil!" half screamed the girl, giving his ugly face a stinging slap.

"You damned little fury! I'll show you," he snarled, grabbing her arm. He flung his other arm about her and bent his face toward hers.

With the strength of desperation she fought to free herself from his brutal embrace. But the more she struggled, the more determined he grew to wreak his ugly will. In despair, she gave a cry for help.

Fred, who was already galloping back to tell her he must go rally his scattered herd, caught the cry and dashed through the brush. The sight set him on fire. Jumping from his mare, he leaped toward the struggling pair and struck Bud on the head. The cur, taken by surprise, loosed his hold and turned to get

another blow full in the face. He staggered and fell over the bank backward into Shadow Pool.

Luckily, during the struggle, his revolver had dropped out of its holster. Fred grabbed it, and when the bully, foaming with fury, sputtered back upon the bank, he faced his own weapon.

"Go!" Fred commanded, "go! before I kill you!"

Nixon needed no second warning. He plunged like a whipped dog into the brush and skulked away to safety. Alta sank to the ground exhausted.

"Come, Alta, get on Eagle, quick; we must leave this place."

He hurried to bring the horse and helped her into the saddle. She could hardly hold herself there.

"Now, Alta," he said, "be brave; I'll take care of you." He vaulted into his own saddle as he spoke and rode close by her side, supporting her with one arm as they went slowly along the trail.

"Fred," she said, as they neared the Morgan ranch, "you needn't go any farther. I'm all right."

"But I mean to see you safely home."

"Please don't," she pleaded; "go back to your herd. Uncle must not know a word of this. It will drive him wild with worry and anger."

"Surely you don't want that devil to escape. I'll rouse the valley to capture and punish him."

"Let him go, Fred; God will punish him."

"Well, if you wish it," he said reluctantly; "but it's hard to hold down my feelings."

"Thank you, I'll see you again. God bless you for being so good to me. But take care of yourself, Fred."

She touched her reins as she spoke and Eagle carried her on gently toward home. Fred watched until she passed through the ranch gate, then with a strange feeling tugging at his heart, he turned to gallop back and gather up his herd.

Why didn't she want him to tell? What could it all mean? were the tormenting questions that kept buzzing through his brain as he scouted about the brush to round up his scattered herd. For several hours he hunted and worried and worried and hunted. The sun wheeled far down the west before he had his herd together; and then to his dismay, when he counted up, one of his best cows was missing. Heading the rest toward the ranch, he took one more look up the creek. Half a mile away he found the poor beast shot dead.

It was the work of that dastardly white Indian, Fred felt sure of that. But the coward had no weapon. How could he do it? The boy examined the ground about the animal. Several moccasin tracks and the print of pony hoofs told him that Nixon was not alone.

His first impulse was to strike for the ranch and rouse the valley. But his promise to Alta held him from doing anything. He would keep his eyes open and find out for himself what was wrong. The time might come when he could strike. "And if it ever does come," he said to himself, "I'll strike hard."

Chapter XIV

AT THE OLD SHACK

CRISP autumn time had come. With lavish yet artistic touch the season had painted all the craggy mountain land. The hills, splashed with scarlet, yellow, purple, and other gorgeous hues, seemed to have put on Joseph's coat of many colors. The sunburnt meadows, patterned with golden willow patches, made a pretty carpet for the valley floor, while over all the pink-tinted mist of the Indian summer sun threw a veil of mystic beauty.

Poets are prone to sing of the autumn as the melancholy time of the year. Rather is it nature's social season, the time when all wild things gather to celebrate with gorgeous pageantry, and to feast on the good things Mother Nature spreads before them.

Wild ducks and geese and cranes and swans filled the air or swam on pond and rivers. Partridges whirred through the groves; sage hens flocked upon the flats. Deer and elk gathered out of their retreats far up among the

snowy peaks to come down into the less frosty canyons. Herds of antelope fed and frolicked over the rolling hills. It was the time of peace and plenty that precedes the gloomy days when "all wild things lie down to sleep."

The Indians, alive to their needs for the oncoming winter, made the most of the time to lay in an ample store of meat and skins. The hunters scoured the hills for game. Nixon, fearing the outcome of his attack on Alta, held his band of marauders in check for a time. Fred kept closer watch of his herd, grazing them nearer home until, when haying was over, they were turned into the fenced meadows and he was set at other work. All hands were needed now for the roundup.

Nixon knew that his thieving business was about over, so to finish his work with a flourish that would give him added glory in the eyes of the Indians, and at the same time glut his desire for revenge, he made his final scheme. This worked out, he would "quit the hole forever." His evil thought proved prophetic.

All the ranches were astir with preparation for the roundup. Getting ready the outfit, broncho-breaking, roping contests were the order of the day. The old rangers welcomed the change. They did not take kindly to fol-

lowing the "hay basket," hauling timber, and doing the other "greaser" jobs.

"I'd a heap ruther be aboard a horse trailin' steers," said Jim. "If this fencin' business keeps up, there won't be any use for cow-punchers in a few years. I hate them horse-murderin' wires anyway."

"It sure ain't what it was a few years back," added Noisy, a new recruit at the ranch, whose sobriquet had been given because of his tendency to brag long and loudly. "Why, when I worked fer old Peg Leg Jones over on North Platte, we could ride a month and never see a fence. You knew old Peg Leg, didn't you, Jim?"

"Yes, I remember the old cuss, well enough. He owes me two months' pay yet."

"Well, he was mean all right; but he could ride any bronk that ever bucked."

"He couldn't ride a winter-killed jackass," said Jim.

"Couldn't, eh? Well, you never seen him, that's all. I watched a cayuse pitch over back'ards with him one day; an' blame me, if Old Peg didn't come back up with that cayuse when he got up, clingin' to the saddle and swingin' his old rag hat, and that brute a buckin' to beat the band. Beat anything I ever

seen. Broke his old wooden leg, but it never hurt him."

"Is that a true lie?" asked Jim dryly.

"It's straight goods."

The crowd laughed.

"Wall, that ridin's nuthin' to crow about," Jim went on to better the braggart. "You ought to see Bill Hicks bust bronchos. I saw one pitch him thirty feet in the air and he lit right back in the saddle without a scratch. Didn't he, Pat?"

"Sure an' he did, and that ain't all. When the baste began to buck again, Bill took off that saddle, while the horse was pitchin' him, mind ye, and the bridle, too; and then he stuck to him till the bloomin' baste was glad to quit. And then fer a grandstand finish, he made him climb the ladder up a haystack."

The crowd roared at the extravagant nonsense. Even Noisy gave up, and joined in the fun.

"The best ridin' I ever did see, fer honest," said Jim, "was when Tim Carter, down on Henry's Fork, brought Old Panther to time, that roan outlaw of the Diamond C bunch. He stuck to the leapin' devil like a cocklebur fer a whole hour. You remember it, don't you, Dan?"

"That was good riding," came Dan's quiet response; "they were both ready to give up, but Tim won out at last."

"He was a bully roper, too," added Jim, "'specially when he was on Old Buck. That old yaller horse had more sense than most men. The way he'd hold a big steer was a caution. Wonder where Tim is now."

"Loafing round a Denver hospital last I heard," returned Dan; "steers got him at last."

"How?"

"Didn't you hear how he was trampled in a stampede down on Bitter Creek?"

"Nary a word; how did it happen?"

"Well, he came nearly ending his trail there. He would have done it if Old Buck hadn't saved him."

"Tell us about it," urged Fred, as Dan paused. The crowd were all eager to hear Dan talk.

"There isn't much to tell," he went on quietly; "it was just a regular stampede. We were trailing a bunch of longhorns through to Montana and one night we had them rounded up on a sagebrush flat down in the Green River country. Tim and I were taking night shift. The sky was clear enough in early evening; but 'long 'bout ten o'clock it had got black with

thunder clouds. The steers began to act nervous, so we kept swinging slowly round them, humming a quiet tune to keep 'em down. Finally, as we were passing each other, Tim said:

" 'You'd better hike for camp and rustle the boys; I smell trouble. Git a move; for there's no tellin' when these devils 'll jump.'

"I struck out, roused the boys, and hit back for the herd, but just before I reached it, there was a blinding flash of lightning and a cracking clap of thunder. The herd jumped as if shot, and bolted away in the darkness. I heard Tim's yell to check them, but it wasn't any use. The herd plunged on. He was somewhere in front of them, and I was following the roar blindly, trying to join him.

"The thunder cracked and boomed above our heads and the rain pelted down. The best I could do was to cling to the flanks of the herd. I couldn't get ahead of them. It would have been madness to try. We charged on yelling and firing our revolvers in an effort to swing the mad leaders toward the drag end of the herd. If we could have got them 'milling,' or going in a circle, we might have stopped them.

"I caught sight of Tim just once. A vivid flash of lightning gave me a glimpse of him,

struggling like a Trojan in his midnight battle with the brutes. He was right in front of that wave of clashing horns. I clapped spurs into my pony to reach and help him; but the herd swept on like a torrent. And it kept on going until daylight broke. When I could get my bearings, I found myself miles away from camp with only about half the bunch. Tim was nowhere to be seen. After a while two of the boys came up and we headed the herd back. They were tired enough to be pretty tame. About sun-up we found Tim, half dead, and almost buried under Old Buck, whose useful life had been crushed out under the ripping hoofs of the steers. We carried Tim to camp, made a litter out of poles and blankets, and took him between two horses to the nearest station, flagged a through train and sent him down to Denver. He got over it enough to live, but he's a cripple and always will be."

"That's too damned bad!" said Jim, soberly; "but it's the kind o' pay that's coming to a good many of us cowpunchers."

"Oh, cheer up, Jamie, cheer up, me boy," said Pat; "ye can't die more'n once."

" 'Tain't the dyin' that rubs," returned Jim; "it's this livin' on when ye're dead. I'd rather hev my old candle snuffed out first shot."

"Sure, me boy, sure!" agreed Pat, "but phwat would it mane, d'ye think, if we all got pitched out of this old world without a word o' warnin'? The angels wouldn't be ready fer us at all, at all. We'd git a hill of a wilcome."

"We'll git that anyway," Jim broke into the laugh that followed.

"Will, I don't know as I moind that so bad," Pat went on dryly, "since I heard Mike O'Larney tell about it."

"How was that?" asked Jim.

"Will, Mike had a dream one night. He dreamed he wint to the Great Behoind, and while he was there he visited both places.

" 'And how did you like 'em?' I asked of him when he was a-tellin' me.

" 'Will, Pat,' sez he, 'to be honest wid ye, I like hiven fer scenery; but give me hill for auld acquaintance.' "

"That's all right, Pat," said Jim, when the boys quieted again, "but I'm thinkin' that I don't want to be livin' in hell here, like Tim Carter."

"Well," said Pat, "maybe the other side ain't such a hivenly place, after all. Fer my part, I don't think I'd take kindly to wearin' wings an' playin' Jews' harps fer all eternity."

"I guess you're right, old boy; but who knows? — I tell you, Pat, let's make a bargain."

"What's that?"

"Well, if I die first, I'll send my ghost back to tell you how things are over there; and if you die first you come back and tell me."

"The divil you say. That's a mighty spooky bargain, Jamie. I'll agree to it though; but to spake me moind freely, me boy, I've no likin' for ghosts."

"Oh, bah! there ain't any," said Noisy.

"Ain't, eh! well, you niver seen one, that's all."

"Naw — ner never will!"

"I'm not so sure about that. I think I spied one the other night when I was gittin' some water."

"Where?"

"Out by that grave, 'long the road where ole Bill Peter's boy was buried, an' afterwards dug up."

"Git out with your ghost stuff; there ain't no such thing," said Noisy. "Let's have some music, Dick, and cheer up this scary bunch."

"All right," said Dick, as he lifted down from the log wall his battered guitar, inwardly pleased to center the attention of the crowd himself. He struck up a jigging chord and led out with a stanza from "Juanita." The others chimed in, and the old shack was soon ringing with

their rough music. They tried scraps of this old melody and of that till they were about sung out; then some one called for an Irish song from Pat.

"Will, be jabers," he said, "I'm no nightingale; but here goes; now jine in the chorus"; and he sang lustily to Dick's jigging accompaniment:

As I sat by my window one evenin'
The postmaster brought unto me
A little gilt-edged invitation
Sayin' MaHuley come over to tea;
Sure I knew that Miss Fogarty sent it,
So I goes up fer old friendship's sake,
And the first thing they gave me to tackle
Was a piece of Miss Fogarty's cake.

"Now all togither," said Pat, beating time; and they gave this lusty refrain:

There were plums and prunes and cherries,
There were citrons and cinnamon and raisins, too;
There were nutmegs and cloves, and berries,
And the crust it was nailed down with glue;
There were carroway seeds in abundance
Sure to build up a foine stomach-ache;
It would kill a man twice, after eating a slice
Of Miss Fogarty's Christmas cake.

"Bully boy, Pat. You're a born meadow lark!" came the compliments as he finished.

"Oh, thank ye, thank ye!" said Pat, making an operatic bow with flourishes. "Now let's try, 'We won't go home till mornin'."

"No, give us 'In the evenin' by the moonlight' and let's tumble in," said Jim; "I'm gettin' sleepy."

Dick struck another chord and they all joined in the old negro melody. Their voices grew tender as they sang the refrain:

In the ebenin' by the moonlight
You could hear dem darkies singin',
In de ebenin' by de moonlight
You could hear der banjos ringin';
How the old folks would enjoy it,
They would sit all night and listen
As we sang in de ebenin' by de moonlight.

At this juncture, Cap Hanks, who had been out making arrangements with other ranchers for the roundup, rode up to the shack.

"Here, Noisy," he called, "I want you to carry a message to Blake's ranch for me. And Jim, you come out to the barn with me while I put up my horse; I want to talk over my plans with you."

"Boys, I'll tell ye," said Pat, when they were out of hearing, "here's our chance to try out Noisy's belief in ghosts. I've a scheme in me head. Come on."

Eager to join in Pat's fun, Fred and Dick jumped up and left the shack with him. On the outside lay some tent poles and a strip of white canvas. At Pat's suggestion, they

grabbed up these and a rope, and hurried through the brush for the grave of which Pat had spoken. It was close to the road. The parents of the cowboy that had been buried there had requested that the body be sent home, and the boys in exhuming it had only half refilled the grave.

Into this hole Pat stuck the tent pole, making it stand up firmly. The canvas was thrown into the grave loose, and the rope, tied to one corner of the canvas, was threaded through an iron ring at the top of the pole. This done, the boys, holding the rope, hid in the brush a rod or so away from the grave. They had hardly quieted their chuckling before hoof beats were heard and Noisy came galloping up the road.

Suddenly a ghost rose out of the grave.

Noisy reined his horse so hard that he almost threw him on his haunches, and stared for a second; the ghost slowly sank back as he sat there stupefied with his terror. He put spurs to his horse to dash by, but up came the ghost again. Noisy whirled his pony and sped back to the barn in a panic.

"What the devil's up?" demanded Hanks.

"I seen a-a-ghost-out-thar" — Noisy's voice trembled like the palsy.

"Oh, to hell with your ghosts! There ain't no such thing!" said Jim, roaring with laughter.

"Go on with your message," ordered Hanks.

"I'll be damned if I will," said Noisy, frightened out of his wits.

"What!" said the foreman; "well, you go or you'll lose your job."

"I wouldn't go past that grave to-night for forty jobs," said Noisy, with desperate determination in his shaking voice.

"Get off that horse, then, you cowardly son of a shotgun," said Jim, "and give me the message. I'll carry it through, ghosts or no ghosts."

The boys who had caused the mischief stopped to listen to all this talk as they were stealing back to the shack, holding their mouths for fear of laughing too loud and giving their fun away.

Hearing Jim's decision to go, they dashed back to the grave again to try it out on him.

Hardly were they settled when up Jim came on a swift gallop toward the grave. And up came the ghost as before.

Jim checked his horse suddenly and calmly demanded, "Who be ye?"

No answer came from the ghost; it simply stood there quietly in the moonlight. The rope had caught in the ring and it could not sink back.

"Speak!" ordered Jim, reaching for his revolver. No answer from the ghost.

"Ping!" went a shot. A yelling and scrambling through the brush followed. "Don't shoot, don't shoot!" cried Dick.

"I thought you could speak," said Jim; "I never seen a ghost that couldn't." With that he spurred his pony up to the open grave and emptied his revolver into the canvas. Then he rode on, chuckling to himself.

It cost the mischief-makers a dollar apiece to pay for the shot-riddled canvas, but the fun was worth the money.

As for Noisy, Hanks forgave him, and offered to let him keep his job, but he found it even harder to face his tormentors than ghosts.

Chapter XV

THE FATAL THROW

THE shack talk, together with the roundup preparations, touched off the growing desire in Dick and Fred to become "crack cowboys." Dick especially was stirred to a high pitch of enthusiasm. He seized every chance to practice the arts of roping and riding, so that when the chance came to display his skill he might not be called a tenderfoot.

It happened that a day or two after the night just pictured, Dick galloped into Fred's herd feeding quietly on the flat, and began the cutting out act, dashing here and there on Ginger, his buckskin pony, a bright little beast at the cow business, and leading the cows a merry chase. Fred, hearing the noise, emerged from the willows on Brownie to learn the cause.

Dick immediately challenged him to a test of skill at roping. Fred hesitated. He knew that it was not a good thing to fret his herd; but he finally yielded to Dick's bantering, handed over

his rope, for Dick happened to have none, and the sport began.

For an hour or more the boys kept chasing through the herd on their ponies, casting the lasso at the excited cattle. Now and again they landed well; but oftener they failed to land at all. Several times they tripped up some charging heifer rather cleverly. It was great sport, — for the boys. They so lost themselves in the fun of it that dusk was on them before they had noticed how the day was slipping away.

"Here, Dick," called Fred, suddenly realizing the work before him to gather his scattered herd, "we'll have to stop this business and put for home."

"Oh, cut it, I'm goin' to snub that black devil 'fore we quit."

"Leave her alone," Fred shouted, "or you'll get into trouble."

Dick's response to this warning was to strike straight for the spirited heifer, his rope swinging round his head. A wicked dig of his spurs in Ginger's ribs brought him within rope's length. He flung at her front legs; but as luck would have it, the lasso caught round her neck. In a flash Dick wound the rope round his saddle horn, his pony checked speed, stopped short, and braced himself; the heifer was jerked squarely

about; but maddened with fright at being suddenly snubbed, she flung back and struggled frantically to free herself from the strangling rope. Dick was in a dilemma. He could not let go without losing the lariat and the heifer wouldn't let him slip it off.

Fred dashed up to help him, and jumped off Brownie to loose the lasso, but just as he reached to grab hold of it at the choking heifer's neck, she plunged wildly; and Dick, taken unawares, let slip his hold. The rope scorched through his fingers. The heifer, finding herself free, dashed away through a thicket of willows, dragging the lariat. Before Fred could leap on Brownie she had disappeared.

"Go it, you bitch, go!" shouted Dick, nursing his rope-burnt fingers.

"Let's get her quick," called Fred; "she'll get tangled and kill herself in that brush."

"Oh, to hell with her! I'm not going to scratch my eyes out in that thicket to-night. Let 'er go; she'll turn up all right. Let's rustle the rest and hike for camp. I'm hungry."

Fred hesitated a moment, full of trouble. "No," he said decidedly, "I'll find that heifer first. You can help or not, just as you please. It's all your fault." He struck off in the direction the heifer had taken.

"All my fault, eh!" bawled Dick after him; "well, you'll hunt your own cows for that cut, kid"; and giving a whoop, he struck for camp, leaving Fred to wrestle with his trouble alone.

The boy beat about the savage brush till darkness forced him to quit; then he turned to rally the rest of his scattered herd. Luck served him better here, for they had gathered themselves after their chasing and were slowly trailing across the flat toward home. A ray of hope came that he might find the missing heifer among them; but the hope was vain. He was up early next morning, expectant to see that she had wandered back. She was not there. He planned to spend the day searching; but Cap Hanks ordered the herd to the pasture that morning, and set Fred helping get the roundup outfit into shape.

"I'd like to hunt up a heifer that was missing last night," Fred suggested rather nervously.

"Heifer missin' — hell you say! You oughter watched 'em closer. Never mind, let 'er go. You help Pat sling things together; the boys 'll pick the straggler up."

Fred was prompted right then to make a clean breast of the business, but the echo of these words flashed over him: "Don't be a cow-baby,

don't beller." He held down his impulse and turned to his new work.

Dick knew that he had played a mean trick. His conscience stung him a little as he dashed away, leaving Fred to hunt in the darkness, but his foolish pride kept his manliness from asserting itself. He would not turn back.

In happy-go-lucky fashion Dick drifted along in the easier currents of life, trusting to luck to bring things out for him.

"Let 'er go; she'll turn up all right," was expressive of his attitude toward life. The thought of harm coming to the poor beast might have crossed his mind; but if it did, he did not care. And as to further trouble for himself,— "Oh, well, even if the kid does beller," he thought, "I'll get out of it all right. The rope ain't mine."

But he had no need to fear. Fred was fully determined not to tell on him.

Chapter XVI

THE ROUNDUP

WITH this determination in his troubled head, Fred plunged into his task of helping Pat get the "chuck wagon" ready for the trip. The day had begun badly, vexations of various sorts kept on plaguing them, till even jolly old Pat lost his temper.

"Holy mither of Moses!" he broke loose, "and where's the rist of me tin china? Hev them bloomin' cow-punchers swallowed dish an' all wid their praties? It's no more than half my utensils I can dig up at all, at all." He gave way to an outburst of profanity that made Fred stare. Suddenly he stopped short: — "Hold on, Patsy, me boy. That's enough. Now cast the divil out of ye — cast him out, I say." Pat grabbed his flask of whisky as he spoke, and took a drink. "There!" he said solemnly, "that's better. Me feelin's and me conscience are both relaved. There's nuthin' loike good spirits for castin' out the divil, me boy. Here's to make sure!" A long drink

followed, while Fred broke into a laugh that loosed the tension of his worry and made things go better. They pitched in then and soon had things ready.

A few hours later they were on the road, Pat driving the team at a lusty trot, while Fred, trailing the extra saddle horses, jogged along in the dust behind. The sun was still several hours above the western hills when they reached the rendezvous. Two other outfits had already arrived, and another swung into camp shortly afterward.

The team unhitched, and another pony caught to relieve Brownie, Pat and Fred began hurriedly to get supper for the hungry range riders, who, they knew, would shortly begin to straggle in as hungry as wolves. A big quaking aspen fire was soon talking cheerily, and it was not long before the bacon and "praties" were singing in the frying pans, while the Dutch ovens were doing duty to put a tempting brown on the baking powder batter that had been poured into them.

The sun had just slipped behind a bank of flaming clouds that hovered above the western hills, when the first herd of cattle was driven in, and a half-dozen cowboys whooped into camp. Too ravenous to wait, they began to attack the smoking food. Half an hour later,

another bunch came; and from then on till midnight the cooks were kept busy with feeding the cowboys that continued to drift in.

"Be jabers, and it's worse than a short order café," complained Pat. "This 'meals at all hours' will keep the cook up all night, I'm thinkin'." But he kept bravely at it till all of the boys were fed.

Night herders were posted to keep the big bunch of cattle within bounds. The "horse wranglers" were assigned their watch, and the other tired men, pillowing their heads on coats and saddles, tucked their blankets about them and slept like logs under the star-sown sky.

Nothing unusual happened that night. Daylight broke to find the cattle still somewhat nervous, but manageable. The horses were grazing peacefully not far away; while half a dozen weary cowboys clung about the herd, half asleep in their saddles.

After a time the cooks began to get busy, and one after another the sleeping cow-punchers got up, "sayin' their prayers backwards," as Pat put it, by damning themselves and the world in general as they stretched and yawned, and waited for breakfast.

Sunrise found them all awake, fed, and ready for business. Saddling their ponies, they struck

for the herd as lively as the bucking bronchos that they rode.

Fred was given the task at first to herd the extra horses; but Noisy happened to get pitched from his pony, sustaining a sprained ankle, and he was given this lighter task, while Fred, much to his joy, was sent to help Dan, Dick, and Jim cut out the Bar B cattle from the big herd, which was now bunched rather compactly on the flat, with cowboys circled about it.

The term "roundup" has a rather romantic connotation. It has gathered a picturesque meaning. All the cowboy life seems to focus in this crowning part of his work. The excitement of the chase, the tests of skill with rope and horse, the grit and daring of it all, added to the unexpected that always happens — so thrill and fill the roundup with significance that it is small wonder this time has come to stand out so distinctly as the cowboy's carnival.

Fred came to this, his first roundup, with joyous anticipation. His reading of cowboy stories, so-called, had given him a good many impressions that needed correcting. Before the day had passed he found out that there is more reality than romance in the roundup.

All day long, amid the bawling roar of the excited herd, in clouds of choking dust, whipped

up by the shifting cattle and plunging horses, the cutting out went on. From early morn till just before dark, the dust-covered, sweat-streaked men and ponies kept up their struggle to separate the cattle that belonged to their respective ranches from the rest of the big bellowing bunch.

Slowly the watchful rider and horse, working together like a centaur, would circle the herd till the right mark or brand was spied. A touch of the rider's heel and the horse would leap straight toward the animal that bore the brand, pushing in among the restless cattle till close upon the picked "critter," and there the horse would stay till the cow was crowded to the edge and forced to break from the herd, to be rushed with a whoop, at cow-gallop, pell-mell across the flat to the growing bunch where she belonged.

Dan and Jim were adept at the business. Their trained horses, too, showed almost human intelligence. Chief was especially skillful. Once he sighted his victim, he clung to its flanks like a leech, turning, twisting, following its every move till he chased it home. Dick and Fred, given the task of helping hold the main herd, had no part at the beginning in the "cutting out"; but after a time Dan, to give

Chief a rest, told them to go into the fun for a while. Both of them leaped at the chance, and they managed fairly well for "tenderfeet."

But it wasn't all fun. They went at it nervously and soon both they and their horses were ready to quit. Noon came and passed. There was no stopping for dinner. The dust grew thicker as they grew hungrier. Their tempers began to get a rough edge; and occasionally they let loose their ugly feelings.

Fred was sent to help hold the Bar B herd. The big bunch had dwindled to a handful. Finally the last cow was cut out and Dick and Jim brought her whooping across the flat. For a closing flourish as they plunged up to their herd, they jerked out their revolvers and emptied them into the air. The nervous cattle jumped as if shot and bolted across the flat with the boys full chase behind them. Fred was on Brownie, who was straining every nerve to get ahead and turn the herd, when suddenly she lurched and fell, throwing the boy over her head. The herd swept on. Fred lay dazed for a moment, then he rose and went to his little mare. She had staggered to her feet and stood trembling with pain. The boy was stunned to find one of her front legs broken. A badger hole had done its wicked work. The boy turned heartsick;

he threw his arms about the suffering animal's neck and cried like a child.

Jim was the first to find the boy in his trouble.

"It's a damned shame, Teddy, and it's all my doin's, damme. I orter had better sense. But brace up, boy; brace up. I'll do the square thing."

Dan and Dick had ridden up. Dan leaped from his horse and examined the broken leg carefully.

"No use," he shook his head soberly; "the little mare's done for. There's just one thing left to do, Fred; you must end her sufferings quickly."

"Oh, I can't do it; I can't do it!" replied Fred, chokingly.

"Come, don't beller," blurted Dick. "Gim-me a gun. I'll do it."

"No, you don't," said Fred, with a touch of anger. "If she has to die, no heartless cuss shall kill her." He paused — then turning to Dan asked feelingly — "Won't you please do it for me?"

"If you wish it, my boy."

Fred stroked the suffering mare's forehead, and laid his face against her glossy brown cheek. She pressed his face gently in response to his sympathy, then he turned quickly and walked

hurriedly toward camp, never once looking back. The boys sat silent, respecting his sorrow, all but Dick. His face carried a flush of anger and the suggestion of a sneer, which made Jim say, when Fred was out of hearing,

"That was damned mean of you, Dick, to jeer at a man in trouble."

Dick winced, but held his tongue.

Fred had just reached the camp wagon, when Dan's revolver was heard. Brownie's sufferings were over; this was the one comforting thought that echoed through his brain through the long gloomy night.

Jim and Dan planned to get the boys to "chip in" and buy Fred another saddle horse; but before they could put their generous thoughts into execution, both of them were sent with the beef steers to the shipping point, three days' drive away. When they returned, Fred had left the ranch. No one knew where he had gone.

It happened in this way. He was sitting out on the corral fence one day with Cap Hanks and Dick, when suddenly the foreman turned on Dick and asked, "Have you been ropin' any cattle around this ranch?"

"No," said Dick, a little confused.

"Well, some one has," said the foreman, "for Jim found one of the blooded heifers up

the creek strangled to death with this rope on, and he says that the string belongs to you."

"Don't know a damned thing about it," said Dick. "The rope ain't mine, that's dead sure."

"Well, Teddy, it's up to you. Is this your lasso?"

"Yes, sir, it is."

"Then you roped the heifer?"

"No, sir, I didn't."

"Who did?"

"It's not my place to tell."

"It ain't, eh? Well, you'll tell or you'll git, and mighty quick, too!" The foreman was angry.

"Then I'll go," replied Fred; "if the fellow that threw that rope won't own up and take his medicine, I'll take it for him; but I won't tell."

And he went. Rolling his few clothes in a bundle, he slipped out of the old shack into the grove near by. All the word he left was this note, which he put in the till of Dan's trunk:

Dear Dan,

I am discharged because I won't "beller." Perhaps I'm doing wrong, but my head is so troubled just now I can't think very clearly. I wish I might have a word with you. Thank you for all your kindness. Say good-by to the boys. I hope they won't think I am as bad as some would make me out to be. FRED.

P. S. Please take care of my bridle and saddle. I'll send for them later.

"I'll bring that stubborn little cuss to time," said Hanks; "it ain't the first critter that's turned up missin' out of that blooded bunch. Two others are gone."

"The kid's done some careless herdin'," insinuated Dick.

"Well, he'll pay fer it. I'll keep the price o' them heifers out of his wages." Hanks didn't think that Fred would leave. He was astounded to find him gone.

If Dan had been at the ranch, the result undoubtedly would have been different. When he did return to learn from Fred's note and Noisy the full story, he was angry.

"Hanks," he said, "you're boss here; and I ought to respect your orders, but I want to tell you that you haven't given that boy a square deal."

"That's my business," retorted Hanks. "Nobody can kill the stock around this ranch without paying for it."

"Who knows that he has killed any stock? I don't believe it. There are other ranches that have lost stock. There's some nigger in this business, and I'll fetch him out."

"That's right," put in Dick, "stick up for the cow-kid."

"You cowardly cuss!" Dan broke out, letting slip his temper; "don't you bark again, or you'll

rue it. If the truth were known, I'll bet you are at the bottom of this dirty work. You have treated that boy like hell ever since you came to this ranch. And all because he wouldn't be a hoodlum like you."

Dick's face blazed, but he couldn't find tongue to retort, so he simply cowered. The other boys sat mute. Suddenly Dan checked himself, and stalked out of the door, walking toward the corral to cool down his temper.

"Dan's dead right, Cap," said Jim; "you didn't give the kid a square deal."

"Well, let him tell who roped that heifer; that's all I asked."

"What! 'beller' on some one else? Look here, boss; I'd see you in hell first, and then I wouldn't. I like the kid's grit. Let the guilty cuss who done it own up and take his medicine."

"Yis, be jabers, be it bitter or swate, that's scripture," put in Pat; "come on now and take the medicine I've got fer ye and fergit yer troubles. These praties are gittin' cold."

The boys needed no further urging. They grabbed up their tin dishes and began to eat heartily — all but Dick; he didn't have much of an appetite. His conscience had been stung a little into life.

Chapter XVII

RANCH ROSES

"OH, you Primrose, that's nuthin'. Do you 'spose I'd git mad if a nice feller tried to kiss me?" Sally laughed noisily. "Why, that's all in the game, goosie."

Alta's face showed pain at this rude reception of her confidence. "Why, Sally, I'm shocked to hear you speak of such liberties so flippantly."

"Oh, pshaw, it only shows he likes you. Dick is a jolly fellow. He don't mean nuthin' by it."

"It only shows he has no respect for himself or me either."

"You'll get over that in time, Miss Tenderfoot," Sally went on; "boys are boys, and we'll have to take 'em as they are, or we'll die old maids."

"Well, I'll die an old maid then, before I'll sacrifice my self-respect to get a beau. Respect and love go together. That's what Aunt Betty used to say, and I believe every word of it."

"My, how pretty you talk — jest like preachin'."

"Well, I mean it."

"Yes, but I don't believe in bein' so stiff with the boys that you drive 'em all away. And that's what you're doin' with Dick. He's a dandy fellow, too."

"Yes, you're right, he is a dandy." Sally missed the double meaning.

"Well, you think a whole lot of him anyway."

"I'd think a good deal more of him if he thought more of himself."

"He's conceited enough, if that's what you want."

"That's just what I don't want. Conceit and self-respect are two very different things."

"Oh, you'll forget all your fine talk one of these days and be glad to forgive him."

"Sally, what do you take me for?"

"Just a silly little girl who's got herself upset by a smart fellow, that's all; but you'll recover."

"Indeed I will."

"Yes, and so will he; for you'll make up tonight and be swimmin' in honey."

Alta flushed. "Please don't anger me, Sally. Be serious. I came to you for advice, and you

make light of my confidences. You surely don't think I'm in love with Dick Davis."

"Oh, no, not yet; but the signs are right for a real case."

"Signs sometimes fail; don't they, Aunt 'Liza?" The bustling housekeeper had just come in with a bucket of eggs she had been gathering.

"Law me, yes; they've certainly been failin' 'bout here. I thought I'd see some signs o' work, 'gin I got back. You gals better make 'em, stid o' talkin' 'bout fellers. That's what you've been doin', I'll warrant."

"Oh, no, we wouldn't do anything like that — specially Alta. She don't believe in fellers."

"Don't, eh? Well, they seem to b'lieve in her the way they keep shinin' 'round."

"Yes, but she —"

"Sally, please don't," pleaded Alta; "what can we do to help you, Aunt 'Liza?"

"Jest pitch in brisk. We got to git this cookin' goin' lively, or we'll never be ready fer that bunch o' fellers that's comin' to-night. It flusters me to think about it. You wash this rice and get it cookin', Sally; and Alta, you skip over to Willis's and git some eggs; I ain't found half enough. Tell her to let me hev all she kin spare. I'll git the pie crust ready while you're

gone. Missus Moffat says she'll bring her girls over this afternoon and give us a lift. Goodness knows we need it."

By the time she had finished her speech, Alta was at the corral, bridling Eagle. Leaping on him, she galloped off briskly along the winding trail that lay like a loose flung rope across the meadow. She was glad to be alone for a moment.

"What's all this feller talk about?" was Aunt 'Liza's prying question when Alta had gone.

"Don't know as I ought to tell," Sally replied.

"Tell? Well, I guess you orter. Ain't I that little gal's protector and confider?"

"Then why ain't she told you?"

"I dunno. The little puss has been kind o' sly lately. There's somethin' worryin' her mind and she ain't so free with me as she was. What's she been tellin' you?"

"Oh, jist 'bout Dick Davis tryin' to kiss her."

"When?"

"Night of the Pioneer Dance."

"And she wouldn't let him?"

"No, she snubbed him for it."

"Huh! so thet's the reason Dick quit comin' here so sudden. And thet's what's worrying her, I know, cause she likes Dick."

"Yes, and he's gone on her, too."

"Well, they'll hev to untangle their own yarn. I've got plenty o' troubles of my own to look after,"— and Aunt 'Liza began to rattle the pots and pans. Sally pitched into the work with vigor.

"Beats me, though, how the fellers flock round Alta when she acts so independent. I guess it's true that the meaner you treat 'em the better they like you," said Sally.

"Yes, but it won't allus work. I've seen many a smart girl who might a had her pick of all of 'em, and hev to take some scrub at last. Girls mustn't be too particular."

"You bet I—"

"Here are your eggs," said Alta, tripping through the door; "and here come Mrs. Willis and Mary to help out."

"Good fer us!" exclaimed Aunt 'Liza; "we need their help. Come in, Marthy."

"I thought you'd have your hands full trying to get ready for the crowd that's coming. What can we do?" said Mrs. Willis, a motherly, helpful spirit, with a touch of refinement in her voice and manner. She had recently come from the city to try ranching, her husband's health having begun to break at too close work in the store.

"You might make the cookies, Mrs. Willis. I'll clear this table for you. And Mary can pitch in with Alta peelin' the apples fer the pies, if she will. Sally, you jest make that rice puddin'. I'll git these dishes washed. The bread's baked, and the boys have got the steer a-roastin'. I guess we'll git through; but it's worse than feedin' the threshers."

"Of course we shall," said Alta; "Aunt 'Liza's a good manager. I only wish I could handle the kitchen half so well."

"You could if you'd keep your head on it; but a body can't cook and read poetry at the same time; still you do mighty well," said Aunt 'Liza, inwardly pleased with the praise. "Here comes Mrs. Moffat. Glad to see her, too. Good mornin', Sarah Jane, come right in."

"Looks like you need another hand, 'Liza. What can I do to help?"

"Set down with the girls there, if you will, and show 'em how to peel apples. I'm afraid they're wastin' too much."

"All right; move 'round, Mary, and let's have an apple peelin' bee, like we used to have in pioneer days."

"Oh, jolly," exclaimed Alta, "and you tell us a story while we work."

"Name my apple first," said Mary, jumping up and passing it for everybody to thump.

"And mine too," said Sally, grabbing one.

"Here, Aunt 'Liza, let's name one for you, too."

"Oh, git away with your foolishness, 'tain't no use."

"Let's name one for her anyway," said Alta. "Now all together, think hard and thump. Maybe it will bring Aunt 'Liza a beau to-night."

"Now for the peelin's," said Sally, swinging hers carefully above her head, and letting the paring drop behind her.

"It's a G," cried Mary; "who's that?"

"Law, that's easy," said Aunt Liza, not too absorbed in her work to keep in with the fun; "G's for Jim, of course."

The girls squealed their delight at Aunt 'Liza's happy blunder.

"Sure! sure! that's it," they exclaimed.

"Well, try your luck, Mary," said Sally.

Mary's paring was flung and it formed an O.

"Old maid, Mary!" teased Sally.

"I don't believe it," said Mary.

"Come, Alta," said Sally, "come, yours next."

Alta's paring broke as it dropped.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"Broken hearts, we always used to say," said Mrs. Moffat.

"Oh, that's bad fortune," said Alta; "it can't be true."

"Apple peelings never lie," said Sally in mock seriousness.

"You certainly will break somethin'," interjected Aunt 'Liza, raising her dough-covered finger to emphasize her remark, "if you don't quit flirtin' with the fellers. They won't keep comin' always, as I'm a shinin' example to prove."

A scream of fun greeted this sermon.

"Oh, Aunt 'Liza's had experience, I know — a real romance, I just know it," said Alta, "but she never gave a hint of it before."

"Tell us all about it," teased Mary.

"Romance! shucks! d'ye think I'd hev fellers pesterin' about me?"

"Oh, don't be so practical, Auntie; tell us something really romantic," said Alta.

"Yes, what did he say when he proposed?" added Sally; "why wouldn't you have him?"

Aunt 'Liza's face flushed as she turned without a word to make the old rolling pin chuckle again across the pie dough. Sally had struck a tender chord rather roughly. All felt it. Mrs. Willis, with motherly instinct, turned their thoughts quickly, by saying —

"Come, girls, stop teasing Aunt 'Liza, and turn on me."

"All right, you tell us how your beau popped the question," said Sally.

"No, I won't tell you that; but I'll tell you about an apple tree romance with a proposal in it, if you wish."

"Oh, jolly, jolly!" The girls dropped their apples and clapped their approval.

"Who was it about? Not you, mother?" asked Mary, a little anxiously.

"No, not me exactly, but I was in the fun. It is about John Watkins; you remember him, Aunt 'Liza?"

"Yes, I reckon I do, lazy old scamp!" came the tart response. "After Maria died he wouldn't do nuthin' but read poetry and chase around tryin' to git another wife to raise his pack o' young uns — think I did know him."

"Well, it's 'bout his proposing to Jerusha Jones that I was going to tell."

The girls were all interested.

"Oh, come now, you must work or I won't talk." The paring knives began to fly again.

"Well, Jerusha was one of my chums, as jolly a girl as you ever saw, pretty, too; and pranks! — what that girl could not think of was hardly worth trying. The fellows were all

crazy over her, but she wouldn't be serious with any of them.

"Well, Jerusha and Mary Snow — that's the one this chicken is named for — and I were like triplets, together all the time, and we knew one another's secrets and shared all our fun and trouble. For we had our troubles, hard work a-plenty, and precious little fun except what we made, but then that's the best kind anyway.

"Well, as I was saying, Jerusha had plenty of strings to her bow, but that didn't make any difference to Mr. Watkins. When his wife, Maria, died, he wanted another, of course, and no one but the best was good enough, that is, to begin with. He changed his mind later and took what he could get."

"Yes, and he got a regular Tartar, too," supplemented Aunt 'Liza, "just as mean as Maria was good — served him right."

"But what was the apple tree romance, mother?" Mary voiced the impatience of the listeners.

"I'm coming to it, girlie. You know we used to get up home dramatics, and Mr. Watkins, being rather literary in his tastes, used to play on the stage with us. Jerusha was generally the star with him, and they were fine, too. I

guess that's how he came to take to Jerusha afterwards. He got used to making love to her.

"One night when Mary and I went over to Jones's, we found Jerusha all flustered over something.

" 'It's coming, girls, it's coming,' she broke out, clasping her hands and acting stage-struck.

" 'How am I to meet it — to meet it?' She acted so tragic it half scared us.

" 'For goodness' sake, what's the matter?' I guess I half screamed.

"Jerusha threw herself in a chair and laughed hysterically. Of a sudden she stopped —

" 'Say, girls, I have a scheme. Will you do it? Dare you do it?' she whispered in stage tones.

" 'Do what?' we asked.

" 'Save me from becoming the mother of an orphan asylum.' She grew tragic again.

" 'You must, or I'll die! I'll die! Will you do it?'

" 'Of course, we'll do it!' we promised, half alarmed at her antics. 'What is it?'

" 'My Lord de Vere is going to pop the question, this very night.'

"Mary and I sank on the sofa screaming with laughter. Lord de Vere was Watkins' stage name.

" 'Jerusha, you don't mean it?'

" 'Yes, I do; he nearly did it last night, but I headed it off. He's coming to rehearse to-night, and I know he'll do it. What can I do? What shall I do?'

" 'Do!' Aunt 'Liza sniffed, 'why tell him *no* and be done with it.' "

"Oh, how could you be so cruel, Aunt 'Liza?" asked Sally.

"Please go on, Mrs. Willis," said Alta.

"Well, Jerusha finally jumped up and cried, 'Girls, I have it! Do you want to hear a real proposal?'

"We danced with delight at the suggestion.

" 'Well, I'll tell you. When my lord comes to-night, you be on hand and I'll manage the rest. Slip down by the old apple tree.' "

"Mother, you surely didn't!" said Mary.

"I'm afraid I must confess, child, that I did."

"And did he propose?"

"Now, don't crowd my story. We waited a long time before they got through rehearsing, and then, just as we had decided that Jerusha was fooling us, here they came sauntering down to the bench by the apple tree. We didn't know where else to hide, so we climbed the tree, and sat there giggling. But we managed to hold

quiet enough until he began to make love in dead earnest."

"Huh! the old softy!" inserted Aunt 'Liza; "jest like him!"

"Did he get down on his knees?" asked Sally; "what did he say?"

"I don't remember a word; we burst out laughing, and jumped up and down on the limbs till the apples peppered down on them. Jerusha broke away and ran screaming to the house, and Mr. Watkins made a mad scramble for the gate."

"Oh, mother, mother!" exclaimed Mary; "how could you?"

"Served the old skeezicks just right," was Aunt 'Liza's unfeeling rejoinder.

"Shame on you for spoiling such a romance," said Alta, laughingly; "how dared you?"

"Well, we got so hungry for fun those days we did do things that were rowdy, perhaps; but if our fun seemed a little rough at times, there wasn't anything really wicked in it. I guess the spirit of the wild West was just bubbling over in us, that's all."

"Is the spirit of the West so different, Mrs. Willis?" asked Alta.

"Perhaps not; yet it seems to me that those who live here long catch something of the wild

freedom of these old mountains. Haven't you felt it? You are a Western girl through and through, even though you haven't been here so long."

"Do you think so? Am I wild?"

"You're a mixture of ginger and sugar," said Sally.

"Now, don't," pleaded Alta; "tell me, Mrs. Willis, what is the spirit of the true Western girl?"

"She is full of sunshine as a meadow lark, and as spontaneous as a mountain stream, as lively as a squirrel —"

"And just as hard to catch," inserted Mary.

"Unless the right feller comes along," said Sally; "then she's tame enough."

"Not the true Western girl," objected Mrs. Willis; "she won't chase after any man. Her heart is hidden as deep as the mountain's gold."

"Oh, you'd make her an angel with wings," said Sally.

"No, I wouldn't, I'd just make her all she is — wholesome, natural, free — a wild rose that blooms among a tangle of thorns, scattering sweetness free and far, but stinging the hand that tries rudely to pluck it."

"Why, you're a regular preacher," said Sally.

"You're a poet!" said Alta.

"No, I'm neither poet nor preacher, but if I were either I'd give you girls one lesson."

"And what's that?" asked Alta.

"Have all the rollicking fun you want, but make it pure, and remember, if you want any man always to love you, make him respect you first."

"That sounds just like Aunt Betty," said Alta, snuggling closer to Mrs. Willis, who responded by smoothing back the silken hair and kissing the beautiful forehead. A tear stole down Alta's cheek.

"Let's sing a hymn now and be dismissed," said Sally. "This is getting too blamed serious. All together now!"

She grabbed up the rolling pin and began to beat time, singing with solemnity in nasal tones:

> "Do what is right, let the consequence follow,
> Battle for freedom with spirit and might."

"Oh, give us something cheerful!" Mary broke in, "like 'music in the air.' "

"You don't call this music, then?" said Sally, in mock injury. "Well, let's try another: 'Mary Lee, we'll roll the dough, roll the dough, roll the dough,' " and suiting the action to the word, she began to make the old rolling pin chuckle on the table.

"That's a heap better," said Aunt 'Liza; "we'd better be gettin' this work movin' faster. That sun's slidin' to'rds night perty fast."

They all began briskly to do the various tasks Aunt 'Liza had assigned them.

"Who do you think'll be here anyway?" asked Sally.

"Jim for one," said Alta.

"And that one's Sally," added Mary.

"Good for poor lonely me! Who else?"

"The rest of the Bar B bunch, with Pat the cook."

"I wonder if Alta's new beau will come?" said Mary.

"Who, Dick? Yes, he'll be here, don't worry."

"But I meant that other one."

"Who, the cow-kid? That young fellow she danced with half a dozen times the last dance?"

"Oh, what a fib!" said Alta.

"Yes, that's the one," said Mary.

"No, he won't be here; he's skipped."

"What do you mean?" asked Alta.

"Well, Noisy says he's been discharged and has quit the valley."

"Discharged? left the valley?" said Alta. "What for?"

"For doing some crooked work with the cattle he was herding."

"It's a cruel lie," said Alta, trembling between anxiety and anger.

All stared at the anxious, excited girl.

"That boy is not capable of crooked work."

"How do you know it?" asked Sally.

"Well, I know him, that's all."

"Seems to be a particklar friend of yours," suggested Sally.

"Yes, he is; and I'll stand by him. If that boy has been driven out of this valley, he's been wronged, and I know it"; with these worried words she turned silently to her work, resolved in her heart to find out the truth.

It was this determination that made her ready to meet Dick more than half way that night, when he, stimulated by Sally's suggestion that Alta was "dying to make up," invited her to dance. His delight in feeling that he had brought the independent girl to terms was doubled when she invited him to sit down with her. But his hopes were dashed when she asked abruptly, "Where is Fred to-night?"

"Who, the cow-kid?" Dick stammered; "why, he's hit the trail."

"What do you mean by that?" Alta half demanded.

"Skipped the country, that's all." Dick was evasive and snappish.

"Why did he do it?"

"He lost and killed several critters out of his blooded bunch, and the boss fired him."

"Killed his cattle? How?" Alta was provokingly persistent. Dick began to get nervous.

"Well, the boys found one with his rope on choked to death, and another was shot."

"Shot? Where was it?"

"Up Sage Creek."

"When?"

"Week or so ago."

"Oh!" Alta's eyes flashed as a new thought struck her. "How did they know Fred shot it?"

"They don't know exactly; but it looked suspicious, and when Hanks faced him, he wouldn't tell nuthin' one way or the other."

"And the foreman discharged him?"

"Yes, he said he'd have to tell or git."

"Where did he go?"

"Nobody knows; he skipped out when everybody was away from the shack."

"Did he have any money?"

"I guess not. Hanks wouldn't pay him."

"It's an outrage," exclaimed Alta, "to treat him that way. That boy has been cruelly wronged."

"You seem to be takin' his goin' pretty rough," Dick insinuated.

"Why shouldn't I? Fred is a friend of mine. The Bar B ranch ought to be ashamed of this business."

"What you people gittin' so serious about?" Sally interrupted them as the next dance closed. "Come on and dance."

"All right!" said Dick, jumping up. "Miss Morgan 'll be glad to excuse me. She's frettin' over the cow-kid."

Alta paid no heed to his jealous tone and words. She was lost in thought. With a woman's intuition, she had hit upon the truth. Bud Nixon was at the bottom of some of Fred's trouble; and she innocently had been the cause. She tried to shake off her anxiety and join in the rollicking fun; but though she seemed happy, a cruel worry was in her heart.

When the celebration finally broke up and the merry noises had faded with the echoes into silence, she stood again by the window looking into the depths of the starry sky above her while she thought of Fred somewhere battling alone with his trouble and hers. It was in that hour that Alta began to learn how much she cared. At last she turned to her couch, and knelt and prayed God to protect and comfort him.

Chapter XVIII

BY THE CABIN FIRE

IT was a cheerless night. The clouds, which had smothered the tops of the mountains all day, began about dusk to drip and drizzle a chilly rain. The dispiriting fall storms had set in.

Uncle Dave, forewarned, not by a "tech of rheumatiz," for his sturdy limbs had never felt that persecution, but by his unerring weather instinct, was prepared for the gloomy spell. An ample supply of meat and other provisions was in his larder; the woodshed was full; so he could rest by his inviting fireplace, as now he did, in cozy content.

He sat in his big rustic chair, his long gray beard adrift over his breast, a far-away look in his half-shut eyes, as he gazed into the dancing flames. Faithful Tobe lay dozing near him. On the wall above hung his old Kentucky rifle, long unused, but kept for memory's sake. It held a store of tales of trying times when it had been his tried and indeed his only friend.

But to-night the old mountaineer's thoughts went back farther than even those long ago tales. He was dreaming of his boyhood days, when he lived with his pioneer parents in the woods of the Buckeye country — days of hazel and hickory nuts, and maple sugar, of husking parties, and "spellin' bees," when Hannah's bright eyes lighted the only flame of love his heart had ever known. What had become of them all? How different his life might have been had the wanderlust not seized his heart! He poked the fire to change the pictures in the flames, and he was just settling back again when Tobe, giving a low growl, jumped up and faced the door.

The old man listened. His sharp ear caught the sound of footsteps. The dog growled again more threateningly, as a gentle rap came at the door.

"Be still, Tobe," said his master. "Who's there?"

"It's Fred."

The old man rose and threw open the door. "Come in, boy, come in. What brings ye here this drippin' night?"

"I'm in trouble, Uncle Dave"; the voice trembled slightly.

"What's wrong?"

"I've left the ranch — discharged, I guess."

"Hev ye been doin' mischief?" The tone was incisive.

"No, I haven't," Fred looked squarely into the calm eyes that searched him. "Perhaps I've made mistakes, but I did the best I could."

"None of us kin beat that; but why d'ye come to me?"

"Because I have no other friend I can trust with my trouble. I haven't any money — they wouldn't pay me — but I thought you might take me in till I can find a way to get back home. I'll make it right some way."

"Wall, boy, you're welcome." The voice was tender. Fred's eyes filled.

"There, now, fergit yer troubles. We'll figure them out in the morning. Get off that wet jacket and dry yerself — but take care of your pony fust."

"I haven't any."

"You come afoot?"

"Yes, my little mare was killed in the round-up."

"That's more trouble. Wall, never mind, set down and thaw out while I git somethin' ready to comfort yer insides. Yer hungry, I reckon."

"Not so very."

"Frettin', I warrant. Stop it, boy, stop it. We can't allus hev our way in this world. If we did, we'd get so cranky people couldn't live with us."

He stirred the coals to warm up the coffee, then he cut some slices from a haunch of roasted venison and put these with bread and butter on the rustic table.

"Here, set up to this and pitch in. You'll feel better after you git a cup o' this smoking coffee down. This fall rain soaks to the bones."

"I'm hungrier than I thought," said Fred, as he began to eat. "This venison is fine."

"That's a piece o' the yearlin' buck I got the other day — shot him right from the door. It seemed kind o' mean to kill him, he looked so perty; but I was needin' the meat; he's as fat as a butter ball; that's the kind that makes good eatin'."

"Do they often come close to your cabin?"

"I see 'em every few days. This storm will bring a herd o' 'em down, I reckon. They winter in the foothills, you know. Elk and moose like to browse on the willows along the creeks."

"Which meat do you like better, elk or moose?"

"Oh, moose beats elk way yender, to my notion; but nary one's got the taste of tender buffalo — or maybe my appetite's growin' old."

"Did the buffalo ever roam over this valley?"

"Yes, herds of 'em. Ain't you seen their skulls lyin' round?"

"I wonder if that was one I picked out of the creek the other day when I went to take a drink. It was a big thick one with short horns."

"That's the kind; they're scattered all over here. I used to hunt 'em with the Shoshones on them rollin' hills over west thar. One time I was with Washakie's band when we killed nigh on to thirty of 'em. That old robe in the corner come from that hunt."

"You knew Washakie, then?"

"Like a brother — mighty good Injun, too. Got lots of white sense in his head; but he likes whisky too well. That cursed stuff 'll end his trail one of these days, I'm afraid. Why I see him one time down at Bridger come into the tradin' store with a bunch o' braves and lift the feller in charge clean over the counter; then he helped himself and his bucks to a barrel o' whisky that stood in the corner; took all they wanted — didn't touch another thing — and they paid for the whisky, every cent, after their spree was over. But it was warm times for the

squaws and papooses while it was on, I tell ye. We didn't know what minute they'd cut loose and lift our scalps. You never kin tell what'll happen when an Injun gits full o' whisky."

"Yes, we found that out when that band got drunk down by the creek a month or so ago."

"What band?"

"I don't know — Old Copperhead, I believe the boys called their chief. They seemed to be a hunting party, but they acted sulky and disappeared about as suddenly as they came."

The mountaineer's face looked puzzled for a moment. "I reckon that's the bunch that's holed up in that cove to the south o' here. I caught sight of their tepees a few days back when I was out prospectin' fer beaver. I can't quite make out why they're hidin' thar; looks like some deviltry to me; and what makes me think it more is that bunch I seen sneakin' up the creek a little while back — 'bout a dozen young bucks. There was a half-breed, or a dirty white with 'em. They didn't see me, but I watched 'em as they skulked along through the willows. Had their ponies loaded with meat. Struck me at the time they hadn't come by it honestly."

Fred's face lighted with the thought that flashed through his mind. "I'll bet those devils did it."

"Did what?"

"Killed my cattle."

"You lost some?"

"Yes, two head were missing. I found one shot dead. The other never turned up. That was one reason I left the ranch. The boss got mad because I wouldn't give away one of the boys that had roped and killed another."

"Maybe so, boy, maybe so."

"You say a white was in the band?"

"Yes."

"How did he look?"

"He was dressed in Injun toggery."

"That's the devil. I'd like to help lynch that black cur."

"Why?"

Fred hesitated, as he recollected his promise to Alta. "But," he thought, "I owe it to her to clear this business up." Then he opened his heart and told Uncle Dave the whole story.

The old trapper followed with eager interest. He studied a moment when the boy had done, then said quietly, "Looks like we've found the snake's trail, boy; looks like it. But it's too late to foller it to-night. Let's get some sleep to clear our eyes."

He rose stiffly as he spoke and walked over to the cot in the corner.

"You'd better tumble in here," he said; "I'll pitch this old robe and a few blankets on the floor."

"No, indeed, I'll sleep on the floor; you must keep your bed." Fred's objection was not to be overruled, so Uncle Dave yielded. They tucked themselves cosily under the covers and lay there listening to the patter of the rain till it sang them both to sleep.

Chapter XIX

IN THE HEART OF THE HILLS

"HOW d'ye like to hole up with me this winter and try yer luck a-trappin'?" asked Uncle Dave as they sat at breakfast the next morning.

"Fine!" Fred responded enthusiastically, "that is, if mother could be cared for."

"Is she dependin' on you?"

"Yes, partly; her little farm doesn't pay much now that she has to let it out on shares; and she's getting too old to do much for herself. I came up here to earn something to help her. It was our plan to spend the winter in the city so that I could finish high school; but my bad luck has upset all that. I shouldn't care for myself so much, but I'm anxious for mother."

Uncle Dave listened thoughtfully. "Wall, boy," he said cheerily, "many's the time I've had to find a new trail by makin' it. This idee came to me last night, but I didn't say anything till I'd slept on it. We might make a good haul by hitchin' up together. I'm gittin'

a little too stiff to chase around after the traps, but I kin skin beaver and stretch the hides as spry as ever; and I reckon you kin larn the business quick enough if you'll listen to me. There are some streams up here that are full o' fur — flat-tails and mink — and otter, too, though they ain't so plenty. I b'lieve we kin make some money."

Fred's heart lightened as he saw this clearing through his thicket of troubles. "I'll do it in a minute," he said, "if I can find a way to make mother comfortable."

"As to that," said Uncle Dave, "I think I kin let you hev some money out of my rainy day savin's. You can pay me when we cash our pelts in the spring."

"That's mighty good of you," responded the boy, "but I'm afraid you are too generous."

"Tut, tut, boy! jest write your mother and make it right with her. I'll do the rest."

So the plan was settled.

"If this storm clears to-day, as it 'pears likely to, I'll take ye up the mountain to help ye git the lay o' things. We'll need some more meat anyway."

The mountaineer's weather instinct proved true. A clear sunset followed by a sharp night brought the morning sky out clear and crisp.

Before the sun was very high, the two were well up the wooded slopes. Uncle Dave led the way; Fred, leading old Buck, brought up the rear.

Their trail led through a wildly beautiful country. Autumn had flung a riot of colors over the leaves and grasses. Wild life was astir. The pine hens, startled from their morning meal among the seeds and berries, would whir from the ground and perch up in the trees within easy reach of Fred's shotgun. He bagged half a dozen of the blue fantails, then tied his gun to his horse; for as Uncle Dave suggested, they weren't "out on a murderin' expedition, like tom fool dudes."

A climb of about two hours brought them up to the rim of the first range. As they lifted to the top, a panorama of craggy grandeur burst into full view. A wild mountain valley patched with pine and aspen groves lay below them. Its farther side — a mighty saw-tooth range of jagged granite peaks, barren, savage spires and broken domes and buttresses of ragged rock, streaked with ancient snow banks — towered high into the blue. Shaggy canyons, down which foaming streams leaped and shouted, had made great chasms in the face of the range, scarring and carving it into fantastic

forms. The valley floor was gentler, a meadowy, flower-tangled stretch of quiet beauty. The streams here, though still playful, had spread in places into delightful little lakes, glimpses of which could be caught shining through the trees.

"That's the doin's of the flat-tails," remarked Uncle Dave, as they paused on the summit to breathe a spell.

"Did the beaver make those lakes?" asked Fred.

"Sartinly."

"How did they do it?"

"Maybe we kin ketch 'em at their work if we'll go careful; then you kin see fer yerself," was the quiet reply.

"This is the place I call Grizzly Cove," he went on; "I killed a big silvertip over by that grove o' pine once. There's a heap o' beaver in this stream and further down in the main canyon. Don't think it's ever been trapped much. Old Pierre, the French trapper, might o' nosed about here, but I reckon he found all he wanted in his hole further down. Over by them dead aspens I killed the elk whose big antlers are above my fireplace. Shouldn't wonder if we'd scare up a bunch o' 'em to-day, or maybe some black-tail."

"Do deer get up here too?"

"Not so many. They like the lower hills; but there's mountain sheep a-plenty among them rocks. Wall, I reckon we'd better be movin'."

He rose as he spoke and began the descent, winding by an easy way of his own choosing down into the canyon. They had gone a mile perhaps, when they emerged from a thick pine grove upon a small mountain lake.

It was a picture framed with pine-trimmed crags, a double picture, indeed; for the water, crystal clear, had mirrored sky, crags, trees, and hedgy banks so perfectly that one could scarce tell substance from shadow. Fred was ready to shout his joy at sight of it.

"Quiet now," cautioned his guide, half divining the boy's impulse; "beaver are ticklish. We'll hev to step keerful if we get a glimpse o' 'em. Here, Tobe, you and Buck stay back while we do some prospectin'." He took off the bridle from the old horse to let him graze freely, and then led the way with Indian tread toward a rocky point that rose among the trees between them and an arm of the lake. Fred tried to imitate the cautious step. They stole up the slope. Gaining the crest, they peered over and looked upon the beaver-made bay — a rounded stretch of meadowy mountain lake in

which the busy creatures had pitched their rustic lodges,— ragged, dome-shaped heaps of sticks, plastered and thatched with mud and grasses.

"The dam is over thar," whispered Uncle Dave. "There comes one now towing a stick towards it."

Fred looked at the V-shaped wave toward which his companion pointed, and saw the little brown animal. Then he saw others, old and young, at work and play. One sat atop his house making his dinner off some succulent root he had pulled; two others were industriously cutting down a sapling with their teeth. Some young ones were chasing one another about in the water. The boy, in eagerness to see them better, began to crawl up the cliff. In doing so he dislodged a stone, which tumbled with a rattle and splash into the lake. In a flash the beaver had dropped work and play and dived out of harm's reach. A few seconds and there was no sign of life about the lodges but the plashy ripples dying one by one on the shores.

"You hev to be mighty still around them critters," said Uncle Dave; "but I reckon you've seen enough; let's go back and hev a bite to eat."

"All right," said Fred, and they retraced their steps to the old horse and dog. Here

they untied their lunch from the saddle and sat down to eat and talk about the habits of the beaver.

"I b'lieve we'd better try another trail home," said Uncle Dave; "mebbe we kin strike some big game if we rise a bit over this ridge to the south and strike down into the other canyon thar."

"You're chief," said Fred.

They followed up the creek for a way, rising gradually up a ridge; then gaining the summit, they began to trail down between two ledges into the main canyon.

They were just emerging from this side gorge when the old man suddenly stopped, and giving a warning gesture to Fred, reached for his rifle, which hung in its leathern scabbard under the flap of his saddle.

Fred looked up quickly to see another crag-framed picture thrilled with wild life. It was a band of mountain sheep filing calmly and unsuspectingly along the rocky trail just below. A stately ram, with great, gracefully curved horns led the march. Following him came a band of about fifteen ewes, younger bucks, and lambs. They stepped springily in single file behind their proud captain.

The old mountaineer stood tense till the leader came within about two hundred yards of

him. Then, just as the ram neared a big rock by the trail, he aimed, fired, and missed.

Like a steel spring suddenly released, the ram leaped and landed squarely atop the big rock. And there he stood above the trail, his proud head turning nervously from side to side while he looked with wild eyes to sight the cause of his alarm. The rest of the band, terror-stricken, bounded forward to gather about the rock whereon their leader stood, and there they waited tremblingly for the signal to strike for a safer place.

The old trapper in a flash had thrown another cartridge into his rifle. Again he raised — this time with the poise of a statue, and leveled at the kingly target. A sharp "ping" cut the still air. The proud ram, mortally hurt, sank and tumbled from the rock to the trail, while the leaderless band broke, scattered, and fled.

The mountaineer did not fire again, though he might have dropped several before they bounded out of gunshot. Fred, unable to restrain himself, threw his hat in the air and giving a shout that waked the echoes, bounded past the old man down to the dying ram, reaching it just as the life-light faded from his great pleading eyes. That sight dulled the joy of the kill for Fred, and his heart echoed Uncle Dave's quiet words.

"It's hard to do it, boy, hard and cruel. In all these years' trapping and killing, I have never found it easy to snuff out the life of God's creatures. Wall, they'll soon get another leader, and there won't be any lambs a-bleatin' for him. Fine sheep, ain't he?"

"He's a wild prince," said Fred; "look at those horns. My, but I'd like to have that head mounted."

"I reckon you kin, if you'll take the trouble o' carrying it home. I'll skin it for you, when we get there. Then you can get it stuffed and get eyes fer it. Take a good look, so you'll know the right color."

"That's good of you," said Fred, as they set to work to get the sheep ready to pack on old Buck's back. Tied securely there, they took up their way again. As they reached the broader trail in the main canyon, the mountaineer stopped and looked sharply at the tracks.

"Bunch o' Injuns has gone down the canyon this mornin'. 'Bout time they was gettin' back. Wall, we'll just keep clear o' their trail by taking another. Same bunch, I reckon, that I see the other day."

"Is their camp near here?" asked Fred.

"Right up in the cove at the head of that gorge." Uncle Dave pointed to the south.

"That's the only trail into it, and it ain't fit fer a mountain sheep. I can't figure out how they got their squaws and papooses into it. Mighty curious to me why they've holed up so smart."

"They're a bunch of thieves, that's why," said Fred, positively.

"Wall, whatever they be, we'd best not cross their trail; let's slip down on the other side of the creek. Foller me close and keep your eyes peeled."

They had just forded the stream and were following a deer trail cautiously through the brush, when the old mountaineer suddenly stopped, eyes and ears alert. He listened a moment, then motioning Fred to follow, stepped quietly into the thicker willows; and there they waited, peering through the brush to the main trail just across the creek, a few rods away.

A moment more and here came the band of Indian marauders, single file up the trail, with Flying Arrow at their head and Ankanamp just behind him. They had almost filed past when Buck snorted. The old horse could never stand the smell of Injuns. One of the hindmost of the band caught the sound, stopped, and looked sharply through the willows to catch

sight of the hunters. He passed the word ahead, and the whole band drew rein and turned around.

Uncle Dave, seeing that they were discovered, began calmly to take up the trail toward home; but with a whoop several of the young bucks plunged their ponies across the creek and headed the hunters off. Old Tobe, bristling like a cornered panther, leaped in front of his master, ready to defend him.

"Quiet, Tobe," said the mountaineer, as the savages plunged through the brush around them. An ugly look of triumph lighted Nixon's face when he recognized Fred.

"Oh, ho! the cow-kid!" he gloated. "Playin' the sneak on us, huh!"—the tone turned hateful. "I'll teach you a trick or two. Here," he ordered, "tie 'em up."

Half a dozen Indians leaped from their ponies to obey. In their scramble one of them brushed too close to old Buck, and the old horse kicked savagely, sending the Redskin head over heels into a bunch of willows. The band roared with laughter at their companion's upset; while the old horse snorted and plunged through the band down the canyon, with two bucks on their ponies after him. As they neared the runaway, Buck kicked again, landing squarely on the

head pony's shoulder. They tried in vain to head him back, but he dodged and finally escaped; and they came whooping back to their comrades.

"You cowardly cur!" Fred broke out, as Nixon with the others grabbed him and began to tie his arms with buckskin thongs, "I'll—"

"Keep cool, boy, cool," came the quiet voice of the old mountaineer. Fred held his tongue, but his heart thumped with distress and anger.

"Now git across that creek," ordered the White Injun. "Hustle up!" he fetched Fred a stinging blow with his quirt.

The boy, furious with the insult, could hardly hold his temper; but he obeyed, plunging through the icy stream behind Uncle Dave, with Bud on his pony, crowding and splashing them.

"Nothin' like cold water for keepin' cool," jeered Nixon.

"You know it, damn you!" retorted Fred, unable to restrain himself.

"Shut up!" snapped his tormentor, giving him another biting crack with his quirt.

"Strike again, you dirty devil!" Fred defied him, tugging at the thongs.

"Quiet, boy, quiet," cautioned the old mountaineer.

"I'll larn ye to be impudent with your betters," snarled the bully, cutting the boy a third time.

They had reached the main trail; the White Injun ordered the captives lashed to some pine trees that stood near; then with his band he withdrew to a spot some rods away and held a council. The mountaineer studied their movements carefully, but he could not divine their purpose.

"What will they do with us?" asked Fred anxiously.

"I dunno, boy, but keep cool, whatever comes."

"Will they murder us?" The boy's face was tense and pale.

"Wall, we ain't dead yet; it'll take all of 'em to agree to that; that dirty white is stirrin' up some mischief, but I can't tell just what."

They could not hear what was being said.

A whoop came from the savages; they leaped on their ponies and came dashing back.

"Keep yer head, boy," cautioned Uncle Dave, his voice still steady, but in his heart were serious misgivings as to the outcome.

The band circled round their captives, yelling and whooping, and occasionally taking a shot. Two of the bucks flung their knives into the

trees just above the prisoners' heads; then Nixon capped the brutal scare by emptying his revolver at the knives. This done, the band gave a furious yell and burst away up the canyon.

Fred, dazed with fright, could hardly rouse himself to the reality that they were gone, when Uncle Dave called gently,

"Hev they hurt ye, boy?"

"I guess not," the voice trembled, "but they've left us here to die."

"Wall, we ain't dead yet," came the reassuring tone; "try to git loose."

They both began to struggle to free themselves from the thongs.

It seemed impossible. They worked and tugged till they were exhausted and sore. As they hung there resting, to try again, they suddenly heard the hoof beats of a horse. A moment more and it appeared with Flying Arrow on its back. The Indian rode swiftly up behind the trees to which the captives were bound, jerked out his hunting knife from its scabbard, and with a few swift strokes, cut the thongs that held them. This done, he sped back up the canyon without a word.

As the Indian band was entering the gorge, the young chief had leaped from his horse, and,

pretending to fix his saddle, had let his companions file past him. The moment they were out of sight, he had dashed back to free the prisoners. The band was just riding into camp when he caught up with them.

"What you been doin'?" demanded the White Injun, as Flying Arrow rode up on his panting pony.

"Fixin' saddle."

"You lie," snapped Nixon, half guessing the truth; for his suspicions had been aroused by the young brave's actions in behalf of the captives during the council.

The Indian's eyes flashed angrily, but he held his tongue.

"You been up to some Injun deviltry; now you keep your place while I'm chief, or I'll horsewhip you."

Flying Arrow took the insult with princely poise. No outward sign revealed how deeply his proud heart was cut and Nixon supposed he had cowered under his abuse. The bully had something yet to learn of Indian nature.

Uncle Dave and Fred, meanwhile, finding themselves free, staggered down the trail toward home together, inwardly blessing their deliverer and wondering the while what had caused him to befriend them.

If the old mountaineer had got a good look at the young brave he might have guessed, for he had known Flying Arrow well. Some ten years before when he was trapping with the Indians, there was one boy papoose to whom he had taken a great fancy, a lithe and manly little fellow full of promise. The old trapper had won his confidence by little acts of kindness, and the boy had reciprocated the friendship. They had many pleasant hours chatting and fishing and hunting together.

But the boy had changed so greatly since then that Uncle Dave did not recognize him quickly; Flying Arrow, however, could not forget "Long Beard," as the Indians had named the old mountaineer. It is a beautiful trait with the Redmen always to remember their friends, and this was no ordinary friendship.

When the weary hunters finally did reach their cabin along toward midnight, they found Buck patiently cropping the grass near by. On the saddle still hung the rifle and the mountain sheep. They quickly relieved his tired old back of its burdens and went in to prepare supper.

"Do you think those devils will stir up more trouble for us?" asked Fred.

"There's no tellin', boy; but don't worry; the Lord has brought us over a pretty rough

trail to-day. I reckon we kin trust him fer the rest o' the way."

"That white devil is at the bottom of their meanness; he ought to be given his just deserts, and I'm going to see that he gets them." Fred's tone had a new ring in it. His latent manliness had been aroused.

"You're right, boy," returned his old friend calmly; "but let's say our prayers now and go to sleep. Give your nerves a rest before you grip that job."

"All right," said Fred, "but I'm going to grip it."

Chapter XX

A TURN IN THE TRAIL

IT was Flying Arrow who had saved Fred and his old friend. The young chief, true to his friendship for the old mountaineer, stoutly objected to killing the captives, when the White Injun, fearing the outcome of his cruelty, suggested that "dead men tell no tales." Since, according to Indian custom, a unanimous decision was necessary to put a prisoner to death, Nixon had to content himself with his brutal scare. And now, thinking that the escaped men would rouse the valley, he made plans hastily to play his last trick and flee to escape the righteous wrath of the ranchers.

A council was held that night. It was agreed that they should break camp next morning. Old Copperhead, with the squaws and papooses, was to make a forced march and camp in the pass to the south. With this start, they could get into the eastern valleys before the whites were alive to their mischief. Ankanamp and his bunch of young bucks were to make the

final raid on the ranches, lifting all the horses they could find. They would make as clean a sweep as possible, both for profit and for the purpose of crippling the pursuit. The raid was to begin at Morgan's ranch, thence north to the Bar B and other places through the valley. Their rendezvous was to be in the pass at the southern end of the valley. Through this they would drive with all speed till out of reach of the whites.

The plot looked promising. It began to work smoothly. Without a mishap and before the sun was up, the whole band had filed out of the narrow gorge and trailed to the mouth of the canyon. Here it divided, the old chief with his weaker chargers skirting along the foothills to the south, Ankanamp with his marauders turning northward into the aspen groves on the mountain side, to hide and rest till dark should come to cover their movements. It chanced that they chose as their temporary resting place a thick covert of trees not more than half a mile south of Uncle Dave's cabin. Picketing their horses out of sight within the groves, they rolled up in their blankets and threw themselves down to catch up the sleep they had lost the night before.

There they lay, dead to the world, when Fred, out hunting for Old Middie, Uncle Dave's cow,

which had strayed away the night before, came suddenly upon the sleeping Redskins. He stared a moment in surprise and fear, then seeing that he had not disturbed the band, he turned cautiously and stole back out of the dangerous den. When he felt safe, he broke into a run up the slope, arriving at the cabin with little breath to tell his tale.

When he did manage to get it out, the old mountaineer shook his head gravely. "Them red varmints mean mischief."

"What do you think they are up to now?" asked Fred.

"Dunno, boy, dunno; but I reckon it's some thievin'."

"Hadn't I better warn the ranchers?"

"Not just yet. I think we'd better do a little scoutin' first. I'd like to git the lay o' the land 'fore we make a move." He studied a moment, then added, "If the stockmen could ketch 'em red-handed, they'd hev a clear cause to clean up that White Injun and his bunch. As it is, we ain't dead sure they're guilty." The old mountaineer went on with his dinner preparations, but his face was full of thought. Finally he said, half to himself, "It's a risky piece o' business, but I reckon I kin do it.

"We'll wait here till long 'bout dark. 'Tain't likely they'll be movin' 'fore that time; then we'll saddle Old Buck and both slip down as close as we kin git an' be safe. I'll leave you thar and steal in till I kin hear what they're talkin' 'bout. More'n likely they'll drop some word thet'll give us a hint o' their scheme."

"No, I'll take that risk," objected Fred.

"You don't know their language, boy."

"But, Uncle Dave, what if they catch you?"

"I reckon they'll lift my skelp; but I ain't caught yet, boy. An' if they try any more tricks on me, that White Injun 'll pay dear fer it, 'fore I'm done talkin'. But let's hope fer somethin' better."

"Well, go ahead, I'm with you whatever comes."

"I've been in tight places 'fore this an' squeezed through. Now, listen, if anything happens to me, jump on the horse and peg it fer help. If I get what I'm after, I'll slip back and tell ye what to do."

An hour later the two were picking their cautious way through the groves of the hidden nest of thieves. Within about two hundred yards of the place, they halted, and the old mountaineer began to steal alone closer to the den.

Fred watched him make his way stealthily into the brush and disappear. Then he listened and listened with straining ears for hours, it seemed, to catch the sound of his returning step, but he heard only the gentle chatter of the leaves, the squeaking of the wood mice, and the far-away call of the coyote, remarkably clear in the dangerous stillness of the night. Once he fancied he caught the sound of voices. He held his breath to hear, but the breeze swept away the sound. It may not have been fancy, however, for while the boy kept anxious watch, Nixon was giving his band of dusky followers their final instructions for the raid.

Another pair of eager ears caught not all, but enough of the plot that was being rehearsed that night in the shadow of the trees, to unravel the main thread of it. The old mountaineer, after a full hour of trying toil, had wormed his way within a few rods from the band, and there he lay, intent to catch every syllable of the rough English that Bud was using to instruct his followers. Flying Arrow interpreted the White Chief's words into the Indian tongue to make sure they understood.

The old mountaineer stayed long enough to get clear the plot — almost too long indeed; for one Indian, leaving the band to look after

his horse, walked within a step of the hidden listener. For a moment he feared discovery; but the Redskin went his way and returned none the wiser. Seizing his opportunity, the trapper turned and crept away, inch by inch, out of his dangerous place.

To Fred the time dragged into an age as he stood in the quiet darkness of the aspen grove. The moon had climbed high into the sky before the welcome sound of the soft returning step came. When it did, his tense feelings relaxed into sudden, half-painful relief.

"Oh, I'm glad you're safe!"

"Quiet, boy," responded Uncle Dave; "now, listen; they've planned a horse stealin' raid. They'll begin at Morgan's ranch, then swing to the Bar B and on down the valley to the north. Jump on this horse and set out quiet but brisk to warn the settlers. Strike for Morgan's first. They'll git there long 'fore daybreak, I reckon. That won't give the ranchers much time, but mebbe you kin gether enough agin they git there to scare 'em off. Here, swap weapons with me. That scatter gun o' yours won't be much use in an Injun fight."

"But you may need it," objected Fred.

"No, they're not after me; I'll be safe in my cabin. Now, go, and the Lord bless ye."

Fred grasped the rough hand and pressed it, then leaped on the horse.

"Sh!" warned Uncle Dave, "they're stirrin'. You'll hev to move mighty cautious, but move."

At the word Fred started again, this time to wind his way carefully through the grove. He kept well within the shadow of the trees till the willowy way of the creek offered another stretch of hidden trail, which he threaded cautiously for half a mile or more, then he struck across the open flat, urging Old Buck to his utmost.

Fear was swept aside. His only desire was to reach the ranch in time to upset the White Injun's plot. The glad thought that he was doing signal service for the settlers and for Alta — service that might lift the cloud from his name — never crossed him. Old Buck, seeming to catch the feelings of his rider, rushed on; but his flying feet were too slow for Fred's eager thoughts. The dark forms of the big stacks and sheds seemed miles away, but they neared at last, and finally he dashed up to them, leaped from his horse and ran to the door. His excitement was expressed in the hurried rap he gave.

The old Colonel, half roused by the galloping hoofs, was brought to a sitting posture by the sharp knock.

"Who's there?" he demanded.

"Fred Benton."

Alta, wakened too, heard the name with a strange joy.

"What's up?"

"Indians are raiding the valley."

"Devil you say!" exclaimed the Colonel, jumping up and into his trousers, and hurrying to the door.

"They'll be here any minute," said Fred.

Aunt 'Liza gave a hysterical scream. Alta, trembling with excitement, ran to comfort her.

"How do you know that?" demanded the Colonel.

"No time to tell now, get ready."

"Go wake the boys"—Fred was on his way before the Colonel had finished the sentence.

Bill and Pete were in a sound sleep, but the word "Injuns" cleared their dazed senses quickly enough.

"How big a band is it?" asked the Colonel, coming up with his rifle.

"About twenty bucks, with a white devil at their head."

"We'll need help."

"Yes, and the rest of the ranchers ought to be warned. I should be on my way, but I hate to leave because they'll strike here first."

"How do you know?"

"Uncle Dave overheard their plan."

"Why can't I go rouse the ranchers?" asked Alta, as she ran out to grasp and cling to Fred's hand.

"It's too risky, little gal," objected her uncle; "you stay in out of harm's reach."

"Not when I can be of help." Alta's tone was decisive. "Get Eagle quick, Bill."

"Alta will make a better messenger on that pony than I," suggested Fred, "and she'll be in less danger on the road than here."

The old Colonel reluctantly acquiesced and Alta sprang to her saddle.

"Go to the Bar B first," said Fred; "then strike for the ranches north and east; watch out for danger as you return. If you sight trouble, strike for Uncle Dave's cabin."

Alta was up and away in a second.

"Take care of Aunt 'Liza," she called back, as she dashed down the road.

"Now get your guns, boys, and let's make ready. Pete, you and Bill take care o' the house; this boy and I will guard the stables. If you sight Injuns, give 'em hell."

The men took their stations as directed.

For half an hour or more the Colonel and Fred waited, straining their eyes in an effort to

see the brush forms take the shape of prowling Injuns, but no signs of such life appeared. The old Colonel began to wonder whether he had not been made the butt of an Injun scare, when suddenly his sharp eye caught sight of a dark object worming through the brush toward the corral. He cocked his rifle carefully. The creeping object checked dead still at the sound; then it began to crawl again. And now another form came into view. The Colonel waited till the skulking savage was within a few rods of the bars, then he took aim and fired.

The Indian, fatally struck, gave a piteous death yell, staggered half up, and pitched forward. The cry brought half a dozen forms out of the brush. Fred fired at one of them as they fled for the thick willows.

This shock at their plot all but created a panic among the band. Only their fury to avenge their comrade, and the desperate determination of Bud Nixon to wreak vengeance on his foes, held them to their plan. At another time the White Injun would have played the skulking coward, but now his blood was up, and he was reckless of the end.

To divert attention, part of the band under Flying Arrow was sent to attack the house. The savages set up a fearful yelling and shouting

as they circled about it. The ruse was successful, so far as uncovering the corral was concerned. Colonel Morgan and Fred, concluding that the house was in danger, hurried to defend it while Nixon struck for the corral to capture the horses. The rifles were cracking and the savages yelling when a wild shout broke through the din, and close upon it came the thumping hoofs of the Bar B horses.

Hearing that challenging shout, the savages about the house fled again for the willows, leaving Bud and his braves entangled among the stacks and stables. Daylight was just beginning to break.

"There goes a red devil," yelled Jim, spurring his horse after a dark form, scurrying for the willows.

"There's another," shouted Dick, catching sight of Bud Nixon, just emerging from the stable door with the Colonel's finest saddle horse.

"Watch me drop him!" He blazed away at the White Injun as he spoke. Bud heard and recognized the voice. His blood boiled. If it was the last act of his life, he'd have revenge now. He whipped out his revolver and fired. Dick's horse leaped sidewise. Bud blazed away again and Dick reeled and fell. Bud ran for his own horse, leaped on it, and dashed away to dive into the

thicket of brush and trees, just in time to escape the charging cowboys. A rattle of revolver shots followed him.

Fred, running back to protect the stock, saw the whole encounter. He hurried to help his stricken companion. Dick lay limp and unconscious, an ugly wound through his left shoulder. Fred turned heartsick as he tried to call his old friend back to life. Several others rode up and helped him carry Dick into the house. While some one was dressing his wound, he regained consciousness. He was seriously but not fatally hurt. Bill was left to help Aunt 'Liza nurse him, and the rest dashed away to run down the daring thieves, who, scattered and leaderless, were hidden or fleeing in every direction — all but three,— they had tasted quickly the wrath of the ranchers.

Chapter XXI

THE END OF THE LONG TRAIL

LIKE a hunted wolf, sore-distressed and savage, the defeated White Chief was hidden with two of his followers in the tangled depths of Mystery Grove. He had heard, with murder in his heart, the cowboys beating about the brush in search of him and his scattered band. Luckily for them, none came within range of his revolver. The noise of the conflict had died down, the search around him had ceased, and the sun was nearly up before they found the moment to dare to skulk out of their risky retreat and make the attempt to thread the willowy trail up Sage Creek, which Nixon had followed a few hours before with such high hopes of glorious revenge.

It was a dangerous gauntlet to run; but it was more dangerous to stay till day should come to light the recesses of the grove. At any rate, he chose to take chances of capture in the open. Luck seemed to favor him. No signs of his pursuers were to be seen. He was chuckling

savagely to himself in the thought that he would give them the slip and have his day yet, when a cowboy, or rather a cow-girl, as his second sharper glance told him, suddenly appeared just above him on the flat.

It was Alta Morgan. On returning from her brave ride to sound the warning, she had chosen the open way on the eastern side of the creek. The two saw and recognized each other simultaneously. Alta checked the scream of terror that leaped to her lips, and cut Eagle sharply with her quirt as she whirled his head to spring away from danger. She was so dazed she hardly knew which way to fly till Fred's words flashed through her mind, — "If you sight danger, go to Uncle Dave's." Straight as an arrow she headed Eagle for the hills.

"Ha!" gloated the White Injun, spurring his horse after her, his fear of discovery and death completely swept aside by the wicked thought that now focused all his hate and energy. He would capture and carry off the proud little puss whose spite had caused all his trouble. A thousand devilish thoughts surged through his hate-fired brain as he spurred and lashed his struggling horse in his mad effort to overtake her.

It was a race for life. Eagle, seeming to sense it, strained every nerve to carry his mistress

out of her terrible danger; but the exhausting work he had already done that morning had unnerved his steely muscles, and for the life of him he could not keep Bud's cayuse from gradually closing the gap between them.

They had gained the steeper hills. Both horses had to slacken speed as they raced up the slope.

"On, Eagle, on!" called the terror-dazed girl, leaning over his neck in eagerness and patting it nervously. The little horse responded to that caressing touch with a new burst of speed. Up the trail he flew, gaining somewhat on his pursuers.

But the brave little horse could not maintain his lead. The White Injun gradually drew closer and finally overtook the fleeing girl; then grabbing her reins, he brought Eagle to a standstill. Alta, in a frenzy of anger and fear, lashed the brute's clutching hand and leering face; but he clung on in spite of the stinging whip until his two lagging bucks caught up.

"Grab her arms and tie 'em tight," he commanded; "then bind her to the saddle." The savages obeyed.

"Let me go, you beast!" screamed the girl.

"When I'm done with you."

"Oh, you devil!" She struggled frantically to free herself from the torturing thongs, but

seeing that it was useless, she suddenly checked and held herself with queenly self-control.

"We'll see who's boss this time, my fine lady," Bud mocked at her; "I told you once that it was dangerous business to play with fire. Come on." He jerked Eagle's reins as he spoke and headed hurriedly toward the south, making his trail through the cover of the scattering groves. The two Indians followed closely behind, nervously looking about from time to time for pursuers.

But there were no friends to dash to her rescue. Uncle Dave, however, keeping anxious watch that morning, had seen it all from the hills above them. The sight fired his old heart; but he was too far away to lift an arm in her defense. The best he could do was to keep general track of the trail they were taking, and when they finally disappeared beyond the canyon a mile or so to the south, he started out afoot to rouse the ranchers. Half-way down Sage Creek, he met Fred, on a fresh horse and leading old Buck, galloping toward his cabin.

"Have you seen Alta?" was his first anxious word.

"Yes, boy, that white Injun has captured her."

"Captured her! My God! Which way did he go?"

"To'rds the south, beyond the canyon."

"The demon! He'll murder her or worse. He must be stopped." Fred turned his horse to dash away in the direction Uncle Dave had given.

"Hold on, boy, you'd better get help."

"No, we mustn't lose time; I'm going now."

"Then I'll go with you." The old man climbed on to Buck as he spoke, and followed Fred's wild lead. "Take it easy, boy," he cautioned; "you'll make better time."

Fred checked his speed somewhat, but could not hold down his throbbing heart.

Bud Nixon, meanwhile, was pushing on as fast as he could with his helpless, worn-out captive to overtake the band of Indians then hurrying through the southeastern pass. It was not till about dusk that he caught up with them camped temporarily in a secluded side canyon.

The savages were in a flurry of excitement. News of the fight had already been brought by Flying Arrow and other stragglers. Squaws and papooses were running about crying and wailing despite the efforts of the bucks to hold down their noise. The appearance of Ankanamp with his white prisoner brought consternation to the camp.

Alta was quickly lifted from her horse and carried into a tepee standing somewhat apart from the rest of the lodges. Her arms were untied, but she was left there closely guarded, at Bud's order, by two squaws, while he and the other leaders held a council in Old Copperhead's wigwam.

The Indians were in an ugly temper over their defeat, and naturally they laid the blame for it upon the one who had led them. Ankanamp was received, therefore, for the first time with sullen silence. He had staked too much on this last throw and had lost, bringing danger and terror to the tribe. This was enough to make the hot-headed braves ready to kill the White Chief.

Old Copperhead had already been put to the test to hold his followers from doing harm to Ankanamp as he appeared. And now he came bringing a white girl captive. Pursuit to the death would be sure to follow in the wake of that dastardly trick. The Indians all knew what that meant; but to their credit they held down their anger to listen to their chiefs. There was little time, however, for talk. A quick decision and action were demanded. Whether to flee or to make a stand and fight was the question; for they knew that the whites would soon trail them to this lair.

The old chief counseled sending the squaws and papooses on that night, leaving the warriors to guard their retreat. Nixon urged an ambush.

"They are sure to follow us," he said, "but we kin beat 'em back and get revenge."

"Yes, cow-men follow all right," said Flying Arrow; "they trail Injun night and day till they git white squaw. Why you bring white squaw here?" he demanded, turning savagely on Nixon.

"That's my business," retorted the bully.

"Make Injuns heap trouble," said Old Copperhead.

"Why you bring white girl here?" again demanded Flying Arrow.

"She's my squaw."

"You lie!" hissed the Indian.

"Well, I'm going to make her mine."

"What you do with Laughing Eyes?"

"None of your damned business!"

"You promise Indian girl to make her your squaw."

"You lie!"

"No, you lie,—she tell me. Now you keep promise and let white squaw go. Then all well." The young chief's words were calm and clear.

"What! marry an Injun? I'll see you in hell first."

"You no too proud to use Injun girl. Now you make Laughing Eyes your squaw, or me kill you!" A savage fire blazed in the young chief's eyes. Bud cowered under his glance. The other Indians stood like statues watching them.

Then Old Copperhead said firmly: "Flying Arrow right. You marry Injun girl. Let white girl free. You do this. All well. You no do it. You die."

"Well, have your way then," said the cowardly cur, playing for time; "we'll settle the job to-morrow."

This promise made, the council turned again to the main issue, and soon decided on a plan of action. They were to follow their old chief's advice. About midnight the squaws and papooses under his lead were to make a forced march, while the bucks stayed behind to guard the trail. The white girl was not to be harmed, but taken back in the morning to the mouth of the pass and set free.

All might have gone as planned, if Bud had not broken faith with the Indians. Flying Arrow, fearing treachery on his part, kept catlike watch of the White Chief's movements.

While all this was happening, Fred and Uncle Dave were cautiously following the trail of the Indians. The keen eyes of the old mountaineer brought them at last within sight of the hidden camp. But how to get into it and free the captive was the trying problem. All fires were out and all voices were hushed. To break into the camp openly would be madness; and they could expect no help for hours, when if fortune favored them it might come. For they had sent word back by a straggling rancher they had chanced to meet. It might be that the cowboys would find the uncertain trail; but their help at best would come late. Something must be done at once.

"If I could only find out whar they're keepin' the gal," said Uncle Dave, "I'd risk passin' the word to her; but it's hard to tell. I'm goin' to risk it anyway."

"Let me go with you," urged Fred.

"No; 'tain't no use o' both of us runnin' into a trap. You kin help better by stayin' here with the horses while I steal down among 'em and try to git the lay o' things." He handed Fred the reins, and picked his way cautiously through the darkness toward the quiet camp.

The mental torture that Alta was enduring throughout these long hours was terrible. Des-

perate to do something, yet powerless; fearing death not half so much as the villain's touch, she sat within the wigwam resolved to kill herself rather than suffer dishonor. A hundred plans of escape passed through her brain, but she dared not risk any of them. Dreading the worst, yet praying and hoping for deliverance, she held herself from doing anything desperate.

The night was advancing. The squaws that guarded her wigwam had ceased their chatter, and sat dozing outside; nothing was audible except the night noises.

Suddenly she felt a light tapping on the tent. Her heart almost stopped beating. Then a voice whispered her name. She could have leaped for joy, but fear held her quiet. She crept to the edge of the tent and whispered her answer, "Yes, I'm here."

"Keep your courage, gal; we'll save you."

"Oh, you will, will you," came the gruff voice of Bud Nixon, who with evil thought in his brain had also crept up to the girl's tepee. "Take that, you sneaking devil!"

A revolver shot rang out. There was a groan and a heavy fall. The old mountaineer, struck in the back by the villain's bullet, had pitched forward and fallen against the tent.

The shot and Alta's scream brought the Indians in a rush to the spot. When Flying Arrow discovered what the White Injun had done, he leaped like a panther at his throat and drove his knife into the murderer's heart.

"You kill my friend, Long Beard; you wrong Laughing Eyes; you die, you die!"

Fred, desperate to do something to save Alta, and unable to stand the suspense, had flung fear aside and followed Uncle Dave into the camp. The shot and Alta's cry brought him into the crowd in time to see the Indian strike down the brute. But his thoughts were all for Alta and Uncle Dave. Rushing to his old friend's side with her, they raised his dying head and tried to call him back to consciousness.

"Oh, Uncle Dave!" she cried, "you must not die. Speak to me."

His eyes opened. He came back enough to realize dimly what was happening.

"Don't take it — too hard," he said falteringly; "it's only—the end—of the—long trail."

The young chief was bending over his old friend with them.

"Long Beard, you know me. Flying Arrow —your papoose-boy long time ago."

"Yes, yes," he faltered, "I — know — you; — thank God, you're here. You — save my

white boy and girl now. You promise?" The words came with great effort.

"Yes, me no let Injun hurt 'em — me take care of 'em."

"There — I — feel — better. Now — we'll camp — over — there — be quiet — Tobe — go to — sleep."

His last words were scarcely audible. His weary head fell back, the gentle, gray eyes closed, and the old mountaineer rested in peace at the end of the long trail.

Fred and Alta sat for a few moments half dazed; then suddenly realizing that he had gone, Alta broke under the strain and sorrow into wild expressions of her grief.

"Oh, Fred!" she cried, "he's dead — he's given his life to save me. How can I ever bear to think what my troubles have cost him?"

"There, don't blame yourself, dear," said Fred, taking her in his arms. "It was a sweet sacrifice for him, Alta; he loved you."

"I loved him, too," she sobbed; "and I love you, for being so brave and good to me."

"Alta, do you really mean it?" He drew her close to his throbbing heart.

"Mean it, Fred? why I have always loved you, only I never knew how much till now."

"Sweetheart!" he raised her troubled face to his. The rest was told in their sweet first kiss. Thoughts of danger and death were momentarily swept aside by the rush of joy that filled their hearts. Out of pain and suffering, their love had suddenly leaped into glad life. They had found each other. A new strength had come to their blended souls; and with it came a sweet comfort, as they sat there hand in hand through the stillness, keeping watch over their old friend, endeared to them now by memories that could never die.

The Indians did nothing to molest them, but made hurried preparations to steal away as they had planned. Silently the dusky forms glided here and there among the tepees; then group after group disappeared along the trail to the eastward until all were gone but Flying Arrow and half a dozen young braves.

When morning broke to light the scene, Bud Nixon still lay where he had fallen, and by his side the Indian girl whom he had wronged sat in silent sorrow.

"Come, sister," said the young chief in gentle Indian tongue, "I'll take care of you." He raised her tenderly and led her away, while other Indians, lifting up her White Chief's body, carried it along the canyon trail; an-

other brave followed these, leading Ankanamp's horse.

They buried him in a crevice among the lava rocks. Over this rough grave they piled stones and sticks to keep bird or beast from molesting it. His horse they killed and buried by him, that he might have something to carry him to the Happy Hunting Grounds. The sorrow-stricken girl begged to be killed too, but they forced her to leave with them.

This done, Flying Arrow returned to take a parting look at his old friend. He gazed in silence for a moment. Then turning to Fred and Alta he said,

"Now go, get friends, carry Long Beard home. Injun no hurt you any more. Good-by."

"Good-by, brave!" responded Alta with feeling.

"Good-by," said Fred, reaching out his hand; "we'll not forget your kindness."

The young chief took the proffered hand, turned quickly, sprang upon his horse and disappeared along the trail through the pines. He was hardly out of sight when hoof beats were heard down the canyon, and a few moments later Colonel Morgan with Cap Hanks, Dan, Jim, Pat and several other ranchers came upon the scene.

The Colonel leaped from his horse to take his "little squirrel" in his arms, and to hold her there while they listened to Fred's sad story.

Touched to tears, the group of rugged men stood in silence till Colonel Morgan said quietly, "Let's make a litter, boys, and carry his body home."

The next day a crowd of ranch folk from all over the valley gathered to pay their last humble tribute to the old mountaineer. They buried him on Sunset Cliff, just above his cabin. An elder made a few remarks, telling the story of the old man's noble self-sacrifice, read the Shepherd Psalm, and offered a simple prayer. To mark the spot, a cairn of rough stones was piled above the grave.

After the crowd had dispersed, Fred and Alta lingered to cover the cairn and grave with autumn leaves. The sun was just setting when they finished their loving work and took the trail toward the Morgan ranch; for the Colonel would listen to no other plan than that Fred should stay there as long as he remained in the valley.

As they climbed the hill above the cabin, they turned to take a parting look. The old mountaineer's home stood in the shadows, deserted, but the last rays of the sun lingered on the cliff,

the newly-made grave, and the sheltering pines above it.

"Isn't that a beautiful spot in which to lay his dear old body to rest?" said Fred.

"Yes," responded Alta, "I shall always feel better to think of him sleeping where the sunlight loves to linger."

They stayed a few moments gazing in silence on the picture of light and peace. Then with hearts strangely lifted out of the gloom that had depressed them, they turned in the sunset afterglow to ride slowly home together.

THE END

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